

## *In the Valley of the Shadow of Death*

Acts 22:1-22

4/26/2015

Randy Lovelace

As we are continuing to march forward in the Book of Acts, we now enter the final stages, which makes up one-fifth of the entire Book of Acts and is largely caught up in Paul's trials -- Paul's trials in Jerusalem, the persecution that he would face. Here this morning, we see just specifically the very thing which last time we were together looking at in the Book of Acts, where Paul knew that he was leaving for Jerusalem and what that would mean. In his speech to the Ephesian elders, he knew that he was compelled to go, and he knew that the Holy Spirit had already warned him that when he goes to these cities, persecution will come. And he comes to Jerusalem, and that is precisely what happens.

And so here we see Paul in the valley of the shadow of death. It is another testimony, in Paul's own words, of a defense of the Lord's work in his life. It is a familiar story. It is a story that, actually, here, we hear actually only one new detail. But it is what is behind the story that is, in fact, the drama, and is for us the place where we are to glean the greatest lessons from the apostle Paul. Because this is his testimony, this is his life, but what we know is that those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ will, too, face trial. They will, too, face persecution. They, too, will face resistance and opposition of various kinds. Is there anything to glean from Paul? I believe there is. So let's look together. Acts chapter twenty-two, verses one through twenty-two. Hear now the Word of God.

"Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense."

When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

Then Paul said: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and 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 also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

"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.

"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.

“Then he said: ‘The God of our fathers 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 men 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.’

“When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. ‘Quick!’ he said to me. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’

“‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’

“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ “

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!”

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Please, pray with me.

Lord and Father, as you have equipped Paul to testify to your work in his life, may you also give us the very same fearlessness to testify to your grace -- to do so publicly and to do so often, as a defense for why we believe. Not because we are of a particular intellect or class or background, but because Jesus has come into our lives and transformed us. But, Lord, there is here, too, the story not of a man’s testimony but of your faithfulness, of your power, of your calling. So, Lord, help us to hear. Give us ears to hear and hearts to receive, and help the teacher to proclaim your truth. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

As I was reading this passage in preparing for this sermon, what grasped me was this great passage from Psalm 23: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Paul walked willingly into Jerusalem, knowing what would happen. This would be Paul’s lot -- not just in Jerusalem, but in the very churches that he planted, those who would seek to undo that which he taught, to persecute him, to call him names, and to undo the very gospel that he sought to establish and to preach.

Paul, in the midst of this story, isn’t just walking around Jerusalem. He is actually in the inner sanctum, the inner parts, of the temple -- as was his practice. The passage just prior to this gives us the text. He says, “Seven days were nearly over” -- meaning the feast of Pentecost -- “some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him.” This is largely part of the same group of people who are already persecuting Paul around Ephesus, whose livelihood the gospel was threatening. “They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, ‘Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people.’” And so they began with their accusations. That is what gave rise to Paul’s testimony. But he’s being brought into custody, and with the feeling, as it were, of being in custody around his wrist, being dragged from the temple, it’s there that Paul says, “Let me say and give a defense.” And this is what he does. And in so doing, you’ll see before you in the outline, Paul demonstrates for us the nature of his witness; secondly, the point of his witness; and lessons of Paul’s witness. The nature, the point, and lessons.

But the nature of Paul’s witness is very interesting, because it has such a unique character to it, because it is awash in giving a defense of his teaching, a defense of his faith, from a uniquely Jewish context. It has within it deep Jewish theological basis. This is what angered them so. But we need to understand first the five accusations, quickly, that gave rise to the nature of this defense, this witness. They were this.

They said, one, that Paul was teaching against the Jews, that they were actually sinners like the Gentiles. That was the implication of what Paul taught in the cities of Asia as he went about planting churches, as he spent nearly three years with the Ephesian elders. You can go and read the letter to Ephesus. He is establishing the very things that he establishes in his Letter to the Romans, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." It's the first three chapters of Roman. Jew and Gentile alike. This angered them. How dare you say we are sinners like the Gentiles?

Secondly, they said, "This man teaches against the law." They believe that what he is doing is teaching everyone to disregard the law, therefore, that God is not holy and that he's asking them to disobey God.

Thirdly, they accused that Paul was teaching against the temple, but nowhere in Paul's teaching did he ever disregard or in any way malign the temple. In fact, every city he went to, that was the first place he went was the synagogue. And here is in, in Jerusalem, at the temple worshipping God.

Fourthly, they said, "He has brought Greeks into the temple." But ironically, as one commentator pointed out, isn't it interesting that to arrest Paul, they had to bring in Roman soldiers? His very accusers break the very thing they're accusing Paul of doing. They bring Roman soldiers beyond the court of the Gentiles to arrest Paul and to drag a Jew out of the temple.

Fifthly, they accused Paul of defiling the temple.

These are the accusation which they levied at Paul, which is why Paul goes into his testimony, which we've heard before, but now has such a unique theological caste to it, and that is of a Jewish nature, and it is simply this -- that for Paul and his witness, he was to declare that the Jews were not being denied by the preaching of Jesus, but rather found in Jesus Israel's Messiah. This is the very nature of his defense, because what does Paul do? He states this not so boldly in the way I just said -- he states it even more boldly by saying, listen, I was you. I was faultless in my pursuit of the law. In fact, I was so sterling, such an example of the very thing you accuse me of, that I pursued Christians in the name of our Heavenly Father and was willing to even stand by and guard their clothes so they could kill other Christians. I was there when they first killed Stephen. I was the most zealous of Jews, and yet, it is God and through Israel's Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, who said to me, "Why do you persecute me, Saul?"

He's giving the same testimony that we've heard before, but now he's connecting it to the fact that he was coming -- Jesus, as a Jew, of Nazareth -- coming as Israel's Messiah, saying, you belong to me. So instead of denying or degrading Jewishness, he says, no, I'm showing you the fulfillment of being a Jew, in finding salvation in Israel's Messiah, Jesus the Christ, who is the fulfillment of all that was prophesied by the prophets, who is the fulfillment of all the promises, who is the example of God's holiness given to us in the Torah. He is God.

This is the nature of Paul's witness, and it is of a particular Jewish caste, because he was speaking to those who are accusing him of not being Jewish, of dishonoring Israel. But Paul says, he pleads his Jewish pedigree in this context to demonstrate that contrary to their accusation, he actually seeks their peace. He seeks their salvation. And so he quietly goes into the temple in Jerusalem and he's praying for the Lord to draw to himself, now, Israel his people.

So Paul says boldly, I do not teach against Jews. I am a Jew, and I, in essence, love you so much that I'm going to tell you the truth forcefully of who Jesus is, and of his grace and beauty. And this is the point of Paul's witness. The point of Paul's witness is entirely Christocentric. By that I mean, he says from beginning to end -- none of it does Paul say, look at me, I am the one to be praised. Rather, he's saying, yes, look at what I've done, look at what I gave my life to, but look at how glorious is the love of God in Christ. And he does so by showing how God both directed and disrupted his life.

In giving his testimony, he was saying, I was going to yet further persecute, to further do the very thing you want to do. And yet the Lord in his grace blinded me in my blindness and showed me the way,

the truth, and the life. And actually, finally showed me how to see that God's love and God's grace was always first announced in the covenant of God to Israel, but it was never, ever, ever because Israel was righteous. Rather, it's because we were so unrighteous. It was sent to Israel not because Israel was meant to be the stopping point, but rather, Israel was always meant to be the glory of God on earth, his people, to make and magnify through word and deed that our God is a God of love and holiness and forgiveness and righteousness and redemption, and that is to be example through their humble nature. And yet God rescued them from Egypt, made them his own, to declare his righteous and redemptive purposes. And that grace was to flow through Israel like the mighty oceans, and was to flow unto all nations. And I will make you a light, a city on a hill. And Paul is saying, that's precisely what happened on the road to Damascus that day. God's covenant promises became real to me, because I now saw for myself that it was not through my righteousness -- it is through his. It is not through me persecuting him, but rather, testifying to everyone of him. Glory be to God in Jesus Christ.

And he gave me eyes to see, and a mouth to speak. And then he would direct me. He would warn me. Jesus would not only disrupt my life and direct me to pronounce and be a witness, he says. He would also come and warn me. And this is the detail that is so unique to this particular testimony, that he was seized by this moment while he was praying. And he says, "Quick! [...] Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' 'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue -- "' Lord, how could you want me to leave the very people to who you've called me to witness? And it was there that the Lord, in essence, is saying through Paul -- it was there through prayer in the temple that the Lord told me, no, these people want to take your life. I'm going to send you to a people that only you are being called to preach to -- the Gentiles.

And it was that point, don't you see, when he says that we were sent to the Gentiles. It's at that point that they began to disrupt and want to riot and want to take his life. Why? Because Paul is saying in Christ what he would say in Galatians, in essence. This is in seed form, that Paul is saying, in Christ there is now no Jew or Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. We are all only under Christ as one. We all need Christ equally. And they understood the import of what he was saying, that the Gentiles and the Jews both need salvation and grace through Jesus Christ alone. And they erupted.

Paul's witness here was unique in that he spoke in Aramaic, because it must need a specific Jewish context. Secondly, it was through that unique context that Paul would say the thing that offended them most, that by the God of our forefathers, he has sent his Son to die for Jew and Gentile. There is such simplicity in this testimony. There is forcefulness in this testimony. How does Paul do it? He is at the point of a spear. The whole city is in uproar. They're ready to tear him limb from limb. How does he have such fearlessness? Why does Paul not rage against the ones calling him to account and accusing him? We do not hear revenge or anger. We hear a fearless proclamation of the grace of Christ at work in his life. How does he do it? What are the lessons for us? And I have some that I think I was lead to, and my hope is that it will be helpful.

Paul's fearlessness in his witness is what I come away with in looking at this testimony. First, Paul's fearlessness, our fearlessness, flows not from a prideful and banal bumper sticker proclamation of "no fear." Do you remember those bumper stickers? "No fear?" The t-shirts? The hats? It was so shallow, and so unremarkable when you really looked at it. "No fear." I remember one of my favorite preachers once entitled his sermon, "No Fear." And he says:

Who are we kidding? There is plenty to fear. Have you read a newspaper? There's plenty to fear around us horizontally with other people. There's plenty to fear in the world that we cannot control because of earthquakes and volcanoes. There's plenty to fear because we feel out of control because the governments of the world make decisions, and we feel powerless. We fear our neighbors. We fear the things that are honestly always staring us in the face, that become like little screens of addiction, yet we fear the very things that can come through them. We fear the people who may be listening, who may want to listen. We

fear what people will say, or even what they won't say. There is so much to fear -- not just in the world around us. There's enough to fear within ourselves, when we're honest. No fear. Who are we kidding?

Paul's fearlessness, our fearlessness, never flows from a banal, prideful statement of "no fear." No, fearlessness first flows from a proper fear, and that proper fear is this -- that our Lord is God Almighty who sits on the throne, and Jesus Christ, in whom has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. And Jesus, the very one who confronted Paul, says to all who are here, not a hair on your head will fall that your Father does not have you in his hand. Our fearlessness ought to flow from fearing the One -- not quaking, but a respectful fear of knowing that He is the Lord who can kill the soul, who can also redeem the soul. And if the Lord is for us, O who can be against us? A proper fear is the source of fearlessness.

Secondly, fearlessness flows -- sorry for the wordiness -- from prior preparation prevents poor performance. Fearlessness flows from prior preparation prevents poor performance. Now what in the world am I talking about? These are the words of Jesus:

A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household? So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight. What is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. And are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. Even the hairs of your very head will all be numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. [Matthew 10:24-31]

In the very passage which he says we ought to have proper fear, he also says, guess what? Be prepared for persecution and trial. The prior preparation that prevents poor performance is that Paul was prepared and expected, not respect, but he expected to be disrespected. He expected trial. Let us not fall asleep. Let us remember, O Christian, that our very Savior who was persecuted and died for us says to us, what is good for the goose will be good for the gander. They called him the son of Satan. How much more, then, those who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will not also be called the same. Expect it. But continue to proclaim the grace of Jesus.

Thirdly, fearlessness flows from the resurrection. For Paul -- throughout all of his writings, and through the very one who appeared to him the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ -- for Paul, fearlessness flowed from the resurrection. Why? Because for Paul, resurrection means hope that in the end persecution and trial is not the end of the story, but rather, victory and restoration. That though we may die -- though we may die because of our proclamation and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the end of the story is resurrection, for that is what it was for our Savior who went to the cross and was raised on the third day. So is it for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. So for Paul, he could have fearlessness before his accusers because he recognized, what could you do to me? You couldn't keep my very Savior in a grave, and you will not be able to keep me. He wasn't saying it because he was prideful in himself, but because he was proud of the power of the resurrection. Christian, are you hoping, and are you proud -- in the greatest Biblical sense I can say -- are you proud of your Savior? Are you proud of your God, who looks at death and turns it into a garden? And if that's what he can do with his Savior, all those who call on his name -- then what, O what -- what, Christian, can ever have your name and have victory? Not a one. Only Christ. Fearlessness flows from hope in the resurrection.

But finally, fearlessness flows from promise. When Jesus told Paul, get up, I'm sending you, what goes along with that call and that sending comes along with a great promise: "Where you go, I will be with you also." This is the great proclamation of Joshua. It's the great proclamation which was again echoed in

the Book of Hebrews: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." And he said to Joshua, and he says through Hebrews, as he says to you today, "Be strong and very courageous, for I will never leave you nor forsake you." That is his promise. And though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, there your rod and your staff will comfort me. You will lead me beside quiet waters, green pastures. Though the shadow of death may be dark, he is with you. He is with us.

We who proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ, the church of Jesus Christ around the world, can say -- not in our pride, not in our buildings, not even in our stumbling proclamations, but in the mightiness of his promise -- we will never be forsaken, because Jesus Christ on the cross was forsaken for us. And on the third day, he rose again. And he claims all those who trust in him as children. And let me borrow the words from Martin Luther King, Jr., "The reason why we can trust in this promise is because he says, 'I promise you, I will come again. And when I come again, I will be the judge, and I will bring justice.' Therefore, let justice on that day roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream, because he will be the judge."

And that frees us, as it freed Paul, to love even our enemies. Because don't you see? The fearlessness that comes through a proper fear, remembering that the Lord prepared us for this; the fearlessness that comes from the resurrection; and the fearlessness that comes from his promise of his presence -- this does not lead us to stand before the world as those who are great martyrs and say, how dare you? Rather, this fearlessness, because of what he has done and what he will do, leads us to be the people who are full of humility, faith, hope, and love. Because flesh and blood is not our enemy. Our enemy is Satan, and his verdict has already been declared. Christ's victory has already been made. Therefore, the enemy has vanquished, and death will one day be gone. But until that day, may our hope, may our witness, be that that was Paul's -- a fearless witness because of Him and who He is.

I conclude with this poem from perhaps one of our greatest poets in the Christian tradition, because he was certainly a great hymn writer, William Calper. In his poem "Light Shining Out of Darkness":

God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never-failing skill,  
He treasures up his bright designs,  
And works his sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding ev'ry hour;

The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain;  
God is his own interpreter,  
And he will make it plain.

Dear Christian, whatever trial, whatever suffering, whatever fear you bring into this room, God's word to you is, find rest, for your Lord is with you, and he will never leave and never forsake you, even in the valley of the shadow of death. Let's pray.

Come, Lord Jesus. Bring strength where there is weakness. Bring courage where there is anxiety. Bring rest for the weary. Hear our prayers, O Lord. Have mercy. And give us your presence. In the mighty name of Jesus, whose name is above all names, and in whose name there is life and salvation, we pray.  
Amen.