

### **“Faithful Amidst Arrest”**

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This moment in Paul’s life - he has traveled all over the world, and he walked into this place, into Jerusalem, as a faithful Jew to go to the Temple and be in the presence of the Almighty. He did it with an open heart and hope after traveling around, trying to care for the Gentile people. He is excited because at this moment there may be great change. So he goes in and he visits.

He walks along and Trophimus walks alongside of him, but not in the Temple - [only] out in the streets because he knows that the Gentiles are not allowed in the Temple. Paul would never deface the Temple.

And so he goes in. But, sadly, they are waiting for him. Who was waiting for him was a group of Jews from Ephesus, all the way over there [present-day Turkey] because, remember, when it was time for the Temple - and this is the Festival of Weeks, this is like the Jewish Pentecost - in the same way that [during] Passover, all of the people from around the world came to the Temple in the Festival of Weeks. Here they were. They knew they were going to get him. They lied and said this Greek [Trophimus] was inside the Jewish part of the Temple, the closest point to the Holy of Holies. So they lied and carried on, and said that Paul had defaced the very presence of God in the Temple.

So they drag him [Paul] out. They kicked him and they beat him, and they were tearing him apart; the same way it felt when Jesus was being torn apart by the guards, when they were ready to crucify him. In the same way that the Jews were yelling, “Crucify him,” at Jesus, Paul was being hollered at by the same Jewish people: “Kill him.”

And, in that moment, he [Paul] was saved - but not by the people of faith, not by the chosen people; but by Roman soldiers and centurions, trying to find out what the commotion was. A Roman officer stopped the beating, picked him up, and tried to ascertain what in the world was going on. When no one could answer with one story he knew something was amiss. So they gathered him up - all beaten and torn apart - helped him back to the barracks, alone, and found out that he was a man of God; that they had lied and Paul, in his moment of panic, called out and let them know that he was a Roman citizen, and that he wanted to appeal to Caesar. That was both a blessing and a mistake.

It was a blessing because, had he not been a Roman citizen, they would have destroyed him - let him go back out - and the Jews would have torn him apart. But, in that moment, he went on, told his story to others, and King Agrippa wanted him to be free. He [King Agrippa], too, knew that this was a trumped-up charge. It was wrong; it was indecent. But King Agrippa did not want to get in the way, when he [Paul] had appealed to Caesar, and they let him go to Rome.

But before I tell any more of this story; I want to go back for a moment, so you can truly appreciate what this heroic man, Paul, stood for and how he lived his life. Paul grew up wealthy in what is now Turkey - in a place called Tarsus - right on the coast; so, there were many people coming in and out. It was a place along the Mediterranean - port city, places,

people, boats and ships - where everything was happening in Tarsus. People were very urbane and intellectual in Tarsus because they learned so much from so many, and Paul was wealthy. We know that, because he had such a good education. The Jewish community - and he was a Jew, an Orthodox Jew of that time - followed the law. He was faithful in his Judaism. He studied and knew his Torah, but he could speak a number of languages - Hebrew, Latin and Greek. He could communicate to many people in the ancient world and he knew their arguments, so he had to be educated to be able to talk philosophy with the ancient Greeks.

He could talk to anyone, whether they were of low understanding or brilliance, and he could communicate and debate; so, no wonder that the Jewish community raised Paul up and made him an international envoy, to go out into the world to proclaim the Jewish understanding of faith; to relate to the world and to stop any heretical sects that were out there - that would tear apart the Jewish community.

Paul wasn't the one who was murdering people - he had troops that would do that. Paul was the powerful figure who rode along and made decisions like a judge - who would live and who would die and who would go to jail. He was a fierce defender of the Jewish faith.

Then you know what happened on that road to Damascus. Damascus, a place where there were many Gentiles. They were hearing about this new Christianity - or this new sect of Judaism - where they claimed they already had the Messiah who had come, whose name was Jesus. He was going to stop it in its tracks. Then you know from our childhood stories - he was knocked off that horse on that road to Damascus.

God spoke to him, and his whole world was turned upside down. All of a sudden, Paul went to Damascus, then went to Arabia, then went all over for the next three years proclaiming the Gospel that Jesus was the Messiah - that he was the fulfillment of Judaism. Paul still saw himself as a good Jew, and so he went everywhere.

I want to read it, so you get an idea. He went to Corinth. He went to Galicia, to Thessalonica, to Troas, to Macedonia, to Neapolis, to Philippi, and then back to Corinth. He did three separate journeys. On one he went back to Rome, and set up a meeting with the Apostle Peter. He sat down with others of faith. He wanted the Gentiles to be included with the people of Israel. And the Jewish people said, "Well, all right, but they will have to be circumcised. They will have to follow all of the Jewish food laws. They are going to have to do everything and become Jews, and then they can follow Christ."

Then Paul said, "No." They argued and debated, and they came to an agreement that the Jews would have their own way, and the people who believed in Jesus as the Messiah would have their own way. As long as the Greeks paid and offered money to the poor in Jerusalem they could have their faith their way - and it almost worked.

But Peter caved in, gave up and stopped the agreement. So, Paul and the Gentile Christians were left to their own devices. They were all alone. Paul left Jerusalem that day on his ship. They went and traveled again all over the known world. He did it again in a third journey. Finally, after two more years of traveling, which included many times on ships with natural disasters like horrible sea storms and other things that happened to him along the way, he came back to Jerusalem.

Now when I read about all of these places, let me go through them again Corinth, Thessalonica, Troas, Macedonia, Neapolis and Philippi and Athens, all the way back to Jerusalem, and then later on to Rome, and then perhaps on his way to Spain. I'm not talking about going from here to Norwalk.

I'm reading a book right now about a gentleman who is walking the Appalachian trail. [It] starts in Georgia and goes all of the way up into northern Maine, over 2000 miles of this journey, and that is nothing in comparison to what Apostle Paul did some 2000 years ago. That was before you had cool boots, and the kind of cloth that rain water just flows right off of.

Imagine it, you had a boat that no one would ever ride on now. Going through the Mediterranean Ocean is incredibly dangerous, and he did it over and over again. Many times [he was] beaten because he was disagreed with, beaten by natural disasters that continually befell him. He was one tough person. But the one thing he couldn't overcome were the human beings who called themselves "people of faith," who continually tried to beat him down.

Now he went to meet with King Agrippa, and now we move forward to the end. He met with the Agrippa and he went on to Rome. He waited two years and was able to survive that. Apparently even Caesar allowed him to stay. Then as he went on to Spain he apparently died.

The thing that I want to share with you about Paul was [that] nothing was easy, if you are a person of faith. If you are a hero for Christ nothing in your life is going to be easy. You will have to endure and persevere through every difficult moment. That is what made Paul a hero. He gave himself, over and over again, when he didn't have to.

Paul was wealthy in Tarsus. If he had been smart, he would have followed what his father wanted, and stayed there, and not gotten involved. He would have had a perfect life. But, God doesn't want perfect lives. God wants lives that are messy and difficult, and require perseverance - and Paul had to struggle. The Church in Galicia and the Church in Napoli were fighting over how much Jewish they needed to be. Whether they could allow themselves to be faithful (and all of these false prophets had a better way than Paul's way). Then he goes into Corinth. He had a different battle to fight in the churches he had formed. There they all thought they were better than everyone else. They were talking in tongues to show that they were far superior to those other churches. Over and over again Paul had to fight that battle. Then [he] was beaten physically and marred, but he never gave up.

So, I share this story with you today as part of a Stewardship journey. Stewardship means giving of your money - that is right - but it also means giving of your life to persevere, to know that you believe something, even though you might get ridiculed for it. If you believe that, from God, then you have an obligation; you are required to share it, live it, take your lumps and keep moving forward. Don't give up in the moments when people are the hardest on you. It is probably because they are the most fearful that your truth will be heard, and their comfort will go away - which is exactly what God wants.

Pray for one another this week, that as we seek to be good stewards. That stewardship means being good stewards of our very lives, of our faith, of our Church, of our denomination, of the Christian religion. And, for us, it means being open, loving - supportive of all people. When other people are saying, "I'm far superior. I know the Bible and you are not following it. You are allowing those people into your Church."

Yep. And we are all going to take our lumps together, making sure that this remains an open, loving, caring place and always; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.