

# Courageous Witness

Acts: More than a Movement, Part 2

Acts 21:17-22:29

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I want to begin our morning by reading together the first six verses of our passage because they set the stage for the rest that we will explore together. Remember, Paul just made this last lap through many of the churches he established and delivered some last words to the elders in the Ephesian church. Then in Caesarea, less than one hundred miles from Jerusalem, a prophet named Agabus tells Paul that in Jerusalem he will encounter opposition and end up imprisoned. So our whole passage today outlines the drama of what happens when Paul reaches Jerusalem. And we're going to read together of Paul's entrance into Jerusalem.

## Acts 21:17-22<sup>1</sup>

*<sup>17</sup>When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. <sup>18</sup>On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. <sup>19</sup>After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. <sup>20</sup>And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, <sup>21</sup>and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. <sup>22</sup>What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

James asks the question, "What then is to be done?" We're in a mess. What are we possibly going to do? More than likely you've asked the same question. What am I going to do? And if you haven't you've either not lived long enough, or you're not doing something right.

Life lived is full of moments asking the question, "What are we going to do?" When you encounter a job change, or a move. When you face the troubles and uncertainty of life. What are we going to do?

On April 23, 1910, former president Theodore Roosevelt delivered one of his most widely quoted speeches. Today this speech is known as "The Man in the Arena." I want to quote a section.

*It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.*

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

Roosevelt identifies that when we face troubles and ask “What am I going to do?” there are many different ways to react. You can run and hide, you can rush in, you can stand from the sidelines and critique, or you can choose the way of courage—the path we all long to tread.

This morning our passage tells us about the troubles and trials of Paul but also shows us the courage of Paul. And that’s what I want us to focus on.

This morning we find that the Christian life is a life of courage. It’s the life lived, not on the sidelines, but in the arena. As we look at this section of Paul’s history, we’ll look at three things: actions of courage, consequences of courage, and foundation for courage.

## ACTIONS OF COURAGE

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### *Show up.*

The first important action of courage is really profound. Show up. Agabus told Paul he would end up in chains if he went to Jerusalem. Paul’s companions and Philip’s household urged him not to go to Jerusalem.

But you can’t live a courageous life without showing up. But we have to ask, was Paul being courageous or just foolish? Did he have to go? Rebecca DeYoung, in her book *Glittering Vices*, says this about courage,

*... the virtue of courage has two opposing vices paired with it—rashness on the one hand, and cowardice on the other. Courage is the virtue of handling fear well; someone with courage fears the right things, in the right way, and at the right time. The courageous person feels fear when and as she should but doesn’t let her fear keep her from doing the right thing.*

Rashness then, is what I call, pulling a Romeo. Romeo was ready to die and be with Juliet, but maybe a little too ready. Romeo wasn’t courageous, he was being rash. (Sorry if you love Romeo and Juliet.) Paul is fearing the right things in the right way to reach to people he loves. You have to remember; Paul was raised in Jerusalem. These were his people and he loved them. On top of that, he was on a mission to deliver the financial collection they had gathered for the church, and to report about what God was doing among the Gentiles. Paul isn’t slinking away or rashly running toward danger. And so Paul shows up in the midst of a tension-filled Jerusalem.

Showing up always involves becoming vulnerable. James says there are rumors swirling around Paul. Three in particular: That Paul has been telling Jews who live among the Gentiles that they should forsake Moses, they shouldn’t circumcise their children, and they shouldn’t walk according to their Jewish customs. At this time, around AD 57, Jerusalem was a powder keg ready to explode. The ancient historian Josephus explains how tensions had been growing between Jews and Gentiles. That Jews were growing in zealous nationalistic pride. So that any sort of collaboration with Gentiles was seen as a huge betrayal. This is the environment to which Paul shows up. And met with the question, “What are we going to do?”

***Don't go it alone.***

Here we find a second action of courage: Don't go it alone. Look with me at verses 23-24. James says to Paul, "Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law."

When you hear the word "courage" what picture comes to mind? Is it the Lone Ranger? Going on his own, doing his own thing no matter what anyone says? True courage isn't like that. While courage often leads to lonely places, it never seeks them out.

Here we find Paul listening to James and the elders and following their advice. Paul is asked to purify and to pay so that he might show his love for the law and love for fellow Jews. This whole episode reads like a modern day political fixer. Have any of you seen the ABC show Scandal? Yeah, me neither. But I'm fascinated by the concept.

Here's the tag line for the show: "When you get into trouble—life-ruining, headline-making trouble—there's only one person to call...Olivia Pope. Olivia is a professional Fixer who makes problems go away before anyone even knows they exist." James then, is just a Jewish version of Olivia Pope. But in shows like this, a common theme usually finds the individual needing to compromise on his convictions in order to "fix" the situation. And when you read this you might think, is Paul going back on his convictions? The guy that in his letter to the Galatians wrote: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6).

Is this guy compromising his faith? I don't think so. Can you have Christianity without Moses? Can we get rid of the Old Testament? Is it possible to follow Jewish tradition and be a Christian? The central question that Paul is on trial for is whether or not he is a good Jew.

The answer is yes and no. We have to remember Paul is a Jew who does Jewish things. Earlier in Acts 16 he circumcised Timothy. And in Acts 18:18 he seems to be performing a vow very similar to the guys he is asked to pay for here in Jerusalem. So nothing he is being asked to do seems against what he has done in the past, or against his convictions. It sounds more like what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:20: "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law" (also compare Rom. 14:1-3).

Additionally, James follows his request by reiterating his decision not to require Gentiles to be circumcised. So we don't find Paul or James compromising the faith. Rather what we find here is Paul, our favorite bold leader, listening and following the leading of James and the elders.

Sometimes the most courageous act is dying to ourselves, our choices, and preferences, and listening to others. But of course this plan they came up with...spectacularly fails.

Because courage doesn't promise success.

## CONSEQUENCES OF COURAGE

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Do you listen to podcasts? Any of you listen to the podcast “How I Built This”? There are hundreds like it, but it tells the stories of entrepreneurs and how they got to where they are today—generally pictures of success, wealth, and status. Paul’s story isn’t really like that. From now on, throughout the rest of Acts, Paul will be in chains. The man who traveled the world now trapped in place.

Stepping out in courage doesn’t guarantee success. In fact, courage rarely come without trials. And fear of the consequences of courage is perhaps the greatest hindrance to courage itself.

Look with me at verses 27-32 and some the consequences of Paul’s courage.

### **Acts 21:27-32**

*<sup>27</sup>When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, <sup>28</sup>crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” <sup>29</sup>For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. <sup>30</sup>Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. <sup>31</sup>And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. <sup>32</sup>He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.*

### **Criticism**

One of the first consequences to courage we find is criticism.

A few months ago I had the privilege of writing a book review for our denomination’s online blog. Well, anytime you put something out on the web you know what happens. People have to comment on it. I didn’t get anything bad, but every time I saw there was comment I would get this anxiety. What did they say? Are they going to be mean? In my mind people are supposed to respond with statements like, “What an amazing article!” “You changed my life!”

No one likes criticism. But anyone who steps out in courage will be met with it. And here it’s not simply criticism, but radical and false criticism. Just like the online comment section of a modern day news website.

Here we find: misinformation, misunderstanding, and mistaken identity. The key trouble had to do with Paul’s alleged defilement of the temple, which wasn’t one of the earlier rumors.

Gentiles were not allowed into the inner court of the temple. There was this barrier about 4.5 feet tall, and all along it were signs in Greek and even Latin, claiming that no foreigner was permitted to enter the Holy Place on pain of death. But they produce false witnesses and claim Paul violated this sacred law. Luke tells us it was a case of mistaken identity. That people confused Trophimus for having gone in the temple.

Paul didn’t fear the consequence of criticism, it was something he had been dealing with throughout his journeys, and something that would inevitably follow him to Jerusalem.

### *Failure*

The second consequence of courage is failure. It's clear that their plan, which was to bring peace and convince others that the rumors against Paul weren't true, completely fails.

More than that he suffers the radical violence of a mob. Courage is often met with failure, but that doesn't mean it's not successful. Author N.D. Wilson, in his book *Dandelion Fire* writes: "Sometimes standing against evil is more important than defeating it. The greatest heroes stand because it is right to do so, not because they believe they will walk away with their lives. Such selfless courage is a victory in itself."

For Paul, he was walking the same victorious road as Christ. Both rejected by their own people; unjustly accused and misrepresented; both suffering physical pain. The crowd drags Paul out of the temple and the gates are shut behind him. Never again will he enter the temple. The crowd then proceeds to beat him relentlessly. To rid the earth of him.

### *Opportunity*

But Paul didn't fear the consequences of failure or death. He'd suffered it throughout his missionary journeys. He knew that the only real failure is giving up. Because the last consequence of courage is opportunity.

Not every act of courage is going to work out, but each step of courage creates opportunity where there was none. Paul was not going to throw away his shot to serve his Lord.

The soldiers break up the fight, placing Paul in chains, and begin to drag him up the steps of the Antonia Fortress. Providing him the opportunity to share the foundation of his hope, the foundation of his calling, the foundation for his courage.

## **FOUNDATION FOR COURAGE**

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As Paul is being dragged up the steps of the Roman fortress, the mob is still pressing in against them. Paul then asks the guards if he can address the crowd from the steps.

Just imagine him standing there, bloody and beaten. He would have looked sweaty, doubled over in pain with a busted lip and a black eye. Blood trailing down his face. It's in this state he says what follows. Look with me at Acts 22.

### **Acts 22:1-22**

<sup>1</sup>"Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."

<sup>2</sup>And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

<sup>3</sup>"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. <sup>4</sup>I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, <sup>5</sup>as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

<sup>6</sup>“As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. <sup>7</sup>And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ <sup>8</sup>And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ <sup>9</sup>Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. <sup>10</sup>And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ <sup>11</sup>And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

<sup>12</sup>“And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, <sup>13</sup>came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. <sup>14</sup>And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; <sup>15</sup>for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. <sup>16</sup>And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

<sup>17</sup>“When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance <sup>18</sup>and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ <sup>19</sup>And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. <sup>20</sup>And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ <sup>21</sup>And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

<sup>22</sup>Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

This scene is emotionally heavy. He stands there in this moment ready to address the Jewish people. His own people that he deeply loves.

You’ll notice throughout this entire episode we never heard from Paul—throughout the plan, its execution, or the reaction of the mob. Paul’s speech isn’t recorded. The reason is because everything has been leading to this moment, the testimony of Paul. Paul calls it a defense, but it’s not a great defense.

Remember, the main charge revolved around the temple and Paul doesn’t even mention the fact that Trophimus, the Ephesian, never entered the temple with him. Wouldn’t that have cleared everything up? This defense is a defense for who Paul is. This defense is for the hope Paul has. This defense is the story of his life.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF STORY

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What’s the story of your life? How do you tell it? We navigate life based on the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. And these stories can either elicit courage or cowardice. But if you’re like me, you’re really good at telling yourself lies: I’m not good enough, perfect enough, thin enough, successful enough, smart enough, important enough; I’ve done too many awful things.

And each of these lies keep us from being courageous. Now the social scientists have part of the solution right. Brene Brown, who is a fantastic researcher on shame and vulnerability, says courage, or what she calls wholehearted living, comes from a place of worthiness. Here’s how she describes it: “It’s going to bed at night thinking, Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.”

And on the whole she's right or almost right. But our worthiness isn't an abstract quality we simply claim.

True courage is not simply about believing in yourself, but believing in the Lord who calls you to himself. What's so amazing about Paul's story is that he tells his personal story as a part of God's larger story in the world. His story is not his own, but it's God's. And so is each of ours. That's where courage comes from.

Paul's courage is founded on the core of his story, that he is not his own, but belongs body and soul, both in life and death, to God and our savior Jesus Christ.

Paul has been saved and transformed by Christ, and it changes how he sees the rest of his life. This is the only way he could have the courage to face the arena of life. To go back to Jerusalem confident in his worthiness before God, not them. And it's the only way we can find courage as well.

When you consider who you are, how do you tell that story?

If you're like Paul, it's a story wrapped up in what God is doing. Your story is wrapped up in the story God is writing. Paul's story is important and so is yours. But you know, sometimes I really hate Paul's story. Can I admit that? What I mean is, I get really intimidated by Paul's story. Sure *his* story is important, but not mine. I don't have a story as dramatic as that. Many of us probably have more of a Timothy story than a Paul.

Timothy's story is one of being raised in a good Christian home (2 Tim. 1:5). It's always funny to me that as parents we want our kids to grow up knowing the Lord, but then as kids raised in church we're confronted with dramatic conversions like Paul's and left wondering if we are a Christian unless we have some dramatic story like that.

But there is a variety of conversion stories in the New Testament. Your story's importance isn't based on how dramatic it is, rather its truthfulness to your life and your Lord. Your story is worth telling and hearing because someone needs to hear it.

Frederick Buechner in his own memoir writes, "My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours."

Your story is one of the most powerful tools of evangelism because it evidences the work of God. And Paul, the one who needed a witness for his defense, through his story becomes a courageous witness for God.

So how did Paul tell his story, and how might we think about ours? His story is more than the moment of conversion, it's looking at the breadth of his life and the way God has led him to this point. We are going to look at three parts of his story (I'm loosely borrowing here from scholar Dean Pinter).

***Paul understood his past.***

We all have a past. We all have shame and regret. Paul gives the highlights. Where he was born, his lofty education. His accolades and triumphs, but also his shame and regrettable actions. He mentions the death of Stephen. A death he might soon imitate.

We all have past moments, good and bad, that give shape to who we are today, but it takes great vulnerability to come to grips with our past. And Paul knows that one of the most astounding aspects of the gospel is how our pasts are redeemed and used for the present. He is mentioning all of this in order to sympathize with his fellow Jews. As Pinter says, Paul “is taking all that is meaningful from the past—even the difficult lessons learned—and carrying it into the present so that he can build bridges with those he loves.”

What about you? How would you write out your past? What are the moments that have shaped who you are?

***Paul recognizes God’s initiative in his life.***

Of course the blinding light and voice. Paul wants his hearers to know that this was an objective occurrence, not a vision or dream. But it’s more than that. Notice how the Lord brings devout followers, like Ananias, into his life to lead and guide him.

One of the Lord’s initiatives and graces in my life involved the devout friends and family he brought to direct and bless my life. I think of friends like Dustin, Josh, Brad, Jesse, Jon, and a couple older guys, both named Gary. I can’t imagine where I would be without people like that. By God’s grace and his initiative, I am who I am because of the blessing of their friendship.

God is involved in every facet of your life. How have you seen God taking the initiative to meet you on the road of your life?

***Paul openly welcomed his future and obediently followed God’s leading.***

God called Paul to be a witness for him. To be a witness for him to the Gentiles. Of course it was at this last part when the crowd found their voice again. And it revealed their real issue. To them, for Paul to be a good Jew, it meant separating from the Gentiles. Yet those were the people God was calling him toward. The characteristic that separated him from the nationalistic Jews. And this journey God had him on would lead him to the very center of Gentile life—Rome itself.

God calls each of us into a variety of vocations. To have the courage to be his witness in every arena of life. To go into our various jobs, communities, and families representing his good name. The last section of our story is living into, and participating in the work of God throughout the world.

***Conclusion***

As we end I want you to consider three small implications:

**First: Know your story.** Take these three sections and write it out. Your story is essential to living a courageous life. Knowing how your story fits into the story God has been writing throughout history.

**Second: Tell your story.** Now, I don't mean a Facebook post with your story. Tell your story to trusted people. Friends or family. Community Groups, if you've not shared your story take the time to listen to one another.

**Lastly: Be Courageous.** In 1939 Dietrich Bonhoeffer left America for the last time headed back to Germany, this being the same year Germany invaded Poland. Dietrich could have stayed in America, and was even asked to, but in a letter to Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer writes: "I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people..." Like Paul, Bonhoeffer returned to the place of his people. The place that would greet him only with persecution.

But he went courageously. A courage not found in his own intellect or power. Rather a courage found in the work of God in his life, a participation in the work of God in the world, and a hope in the God who orders all things.

We have no reason for timidity and fear. We have no reason for cowardice. We are called to a life in the arena. A life filled with striving, failure, joy, devotion. God is writing a story with our lives. A story wrapped up with what he is doing to redeem his people. We are called to live out that story. We are called to a life of courageous witness.