

Take Courage

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[0 : 00] Our reading this evening is from Acts chapter 23, beginning at verse 11.

Verse 11. The following night, the Lord stood near Paul and said, Take courage. As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.

The next morning, some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.

More than 40 men were involved in this plot. They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul.

Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We're ready to kill him before he gets here.

[1 : 29] But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, Take this young man to the commander.

He has something to tell him. So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, Paul the prisoner sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you.

The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, What is it you want to tell me? He said, Some Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him.

Don't give in to them because more than 40 of them are waiting in ambush for him. They've taken an oath not to eat or drink until they've killed him. They're ready now, waiting for you to consent to their request.

The commander dismissed the young man with this warning. Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me. Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, Get ready a detachment of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight.

[2 : 48] Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix. Our second reading is just skipping ahead a little bit. So we're reading from chapter 24 from verse 1, where Paul is now stood safely in front of Governor Felix.

Acts 24, verse 1. Five days later, the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor.

When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix. We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation.

Everywhere, and in every way most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly.

We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect, and even tried to desecrate the temple.

[4 : 04] So we seized him. By examining him yourself, you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him.

The other Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true. When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied, I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation, so I gladly make my defense.

You can easily verify that no more than 12 days ago, I went up to Jerusalem to worship. My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues, or anywhere else in the city, and they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me.

However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the law, and that is written in the prophets.

And I have the same hope in God that these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

[5 : 20] After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor, and to present offerings. I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this.

There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me.

Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin. Unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence. It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.

Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the way, adjourned the proceedings. When Lysias the commander comes, he said, I'll decide your case.

He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard, but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs. Several days later, Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish.

[6 : 32] He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, That's enough for now. You may leave.

When I find it convenient, I'll send for you. At the same time, he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.

When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Portius Festus. But because Felix wanted to grant a favour to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

This is the word of the Lord. St. Silas, good evening. Great to be with you. My name is Tim, and it's a great privilege to open up God's word.

We have much to be thankful for, for Gafcon on this Gafcon Sunday. It is a great movement that we are able to be part of, and I'm personally very thankful for Gafcon.

[7 : 43] Without Gafcon, I would not be doing Anglican ministry in Scotland, and so I'm very thankful for them. Even if it was a very dramatic video that we watched, we can be very thankful for what it's all about.

Let's pray as we come to God's word. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who speaks to us, and we know that, we affirm that historically, as you brought the Bible to be, but we also affirm that now, by your Spirit, you speak to us through your living and active word.

And so as we come to Acts 23 and 24 this evening, would you speak through me, and may we all hear your voice in the pages of Scripture as you interact with us, and as you confront us with your truth in our lives.

And we pray that in Christ's name. Amen. Well, thinking of cinematography that has a particular cultural slant to it, I was told that the necessary part of my cultural adaptation to move to Glasgow was to view Scotland's finest movie, Braveheart, who said entertainment has to be historically precise, right?

Now you can tell me your favourite Braveheart quote later. You've got, of course, you can take our lives, but you never take, they can never take our freedom. But there are others, and one of the ones that sticks out in my memory is an interaction between William Wallace and Robert the Bruce.

[9 : 29] And in this interaction, Robert the Bruce, he has the positional power in Scotland, the formal authority, but William Wallace has the people on side. And Bruce is saying, or he's trying to persuade Wallace that they need to keep the nobles on their team if they're going to be successful in sort of having independence from the English.

And Wallace eyeballs Bruce and he says, now tell me, what does that mean to be noble? Your title gives you claim to the throne of our country, but men don't follow titles, they follow courage.

Good quote. Makes you want to get up and fight the English, doesn't it? Apologies to the English in the room. But what is courage? What is courage?

And where does courage come from? If we want a dictionary definition, we might go for something like being firm or resolute in the face of danger or adverse circumstances.

To live out our convictions, come what may. Now I take it that all of us want to be courageous. And I also reckon that if we are honest with ourselves, we wonder how courageous we actually are.

[10 : 54] Right? If the pressure was really applied to you as a Christian, what would happen? How much courage would we have?

We ended last week in our journey through Acts with the resurrected and ascended Jesus standing near Paul and saying what we heard at the beginning of our reading, verse 11, take courage.

As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome. And our passage for tonight is how Jesus begins to bring about that promise in Paul's life.

The promise that Paul will be in Rome and will testify about Jesus there. Now Jesus' promise to you is not that you will testify about him in Rome. But as Jonathan reminded us last week, Jesus' commissioning in the book of Acts is that his disciples will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

That's a commission that goes beyond Acts. As a book. It goes on in the 21st century through Jesus' disciples.

[12 : 03] It goes on through us. We are part of the story in Acts in that we are the ones who continue Jesus' message. Jesus is with us now by his spirit.

And his command to us is to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Where do we get the courage to do that?

Three points from our passage tonight. The first two are things that build courage within us for that task. And then the third one is something that threatens courage.

Two that build, one that threatens. The first thing that builds courage is the unseen hand of the resurrected Christ. That's where we're going to begin. Open up your Bibles to Acts 23 and 24.

There is an outline in your handout as well. We're picking up exactly where we left off last week. We finish with verse 11. Those words from Jesus to Paul, take courage, you must testify about me in Rome.

[13 : 13] The very next verse we read, the story continue. The next morning, verse 12, some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.

That's probably not what Paul was expecting when Jesus had just given him an ironclad promise that he was going to testify about him in Rome. And in fact, it is the start of a really wild story that Rob read for us.

You can imagine Jesus being like in heaven and sort of presenting this plan to the angels around him as to how this is going to go, right, between now and Paul being in Rome.

And so there's Jesus and he's like, so here's how I think it should happen. Some people are going to try and kill Paul. Uh-huh. And then Paul's nephew will find out about the plot. Okay.

And he's going to go to the Roman commander who will believe the boy. He's going to keep it in confidence and then he's going to summon 200 soldiers to protect Paul and take him to Caesarea. Are you sure that the Roman commander is going to do that?

[14 : 24] I'll make sure he does. Okay. Because then he's going to try and use this to promote himself in Felix's estimation. Felix will give Paul a hearing with the Jewish leaders there too and he will keep him in house because he wants a bribe.

What happens at that point? Well, that's next week. You've got to come back for more. But you wonder, right, at that point if there's like an intern angel who like raises his hand and is like, can't we just put him on a boat?

Right? If we want to get Paul to Rome, why go through all this? Why does Jesus choose this route for Paul? Because of course he could just come up with a far more straightforward way of getting him to Rome.

But Jesus is spreading his name and his gospel through Paul in a very deliberate way. Last week we were reminded and we were reminded in the passage of Paul's conversion story.

It's a really significant story. It comes first in Acts 9 and it's repeated twice more throughout the book of Acts. And at that time back in chapter 9 the resurrected Jesus tells Ananias who was the first Christian who Paul spoke to after the story Acts 9.15 this man Paul is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

[15 : 49] I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. And so Jesus' plan for Paul is tied up with his plans for the spread of his gospel in a few different ways to the Gentiles to the kings of the Gentiles the leaders of the Gentiles and to Israel and it's going to involve suffering.

So it's not a surprise when we get to chapter 23 and 24 that Christ has orchestrated events so that Paul will defend the gospel of Jesus before Felix a leader of the Gentiles he will do it in a public debate with the highest authorities from the people of Israel and that there's going to be a bit of suffering along the way.

And this is the scene for chapter 24 so verse 1 of chapter 24 five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea this is where Paul has been taken by this point under military escort with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus this is the big wigs of Judaism the high priest Ananias and the best lawyer that money can buy and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor that is where Jesus wants Paul not just in Rome eventually but testifying to the truth of the gospel in this setting you see Jesus standing near Paul and telling him to take courage in verse 11 is not just telling him that well it's not that he's not telling him that Rome is the next scene in the story it is to tell him that his story won't end before then so when the persecutions come and when the difficulty comes and when the death threats come and when you're imprisoned by corrupt authorities and whatever happens in your life

Paul don't lose heart you must suffer Paul in order to testify about me Jesus says but know this Paul my unseen hand is holding you and I am orchestrating the events that you are coming up against many of you know Abby Felton fellow Aussie of mine at St.

Silas as her husband is doing the ministry traineeship from September Abby and as moved over to Glasgow to pursue Abby's music performance career at the Conservatoire a few weeks ago Abby had a major recital and everyone who went along to it to support her was wowed by her musical brilliance but slightly to her surprise those who were assessing her performance weren't quite as enamored now Abby passed but not with the sort of flying colours that she has grown accustomed to and not with the sort of mark that would justify to her mind to a human mind moving across the world to pursue studies like this cue for Abby all sorts of reflections on making this whole big life change to move to Glasgow and not getting a mark that justified such a move but as I've been chatting with Abby and as both of them have spoken of how they are reflecting on this and seeing it as a way that

[19 : 31] God is moulding Abby as a disciple of Jesus to shape her character her humility her trust ultimately to better prepare her for a life following him and witnessing to the fact that he is all sufficient she is just where Jesus wants her to be and so are you as you look back on your life and you think of where you are now who you are now the griefs that have shaped you the joys that you have experienced don't have any doubt that the unseen hand of the resurrected Christ has been holding on to you and that he has used you for his purposes in this world for his glory and for your good and even if you're here tonight as someone who doesn't know Jesus you're still investigating things or you've been dragged along by a friend it is not a mistake that you are here tonight it's not a mistake that you are listening to some weird guy from the other side of the world tell you about who

Jesus is and what he's done for you his hand is unseen but it is orchestrating all things so take courage you are not living in a world of unknown circumstances they may be unknown to you but they are not to Jesus and that unseen hand brings Paul to make a defense of his gospel before Felix and before the Jewish authorities leads us to point two the second thing that builds courage the unimpeachable gospel of the resurrected Christ have a look at verse five of chapter 24 this lawyer to tell us is speaking he says we have found this man he's telling

Felix we have found this man Paul to be a troublemaker stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world he is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple so we seized him we did you a favour by examining him yourself you'll be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him and the other Jews joined in the accusation asserting that these things were true so there are two main claims two main claims that are being made against Paul by the Jewish authorities one he is bad for the Roman Empire two he is bad for the Jews he's bad news for the Roman Empire because according to this lawyer he's causing civil unrest trouble making riots you name it this guy is doing it he's bad news for your empire and he's bad news for the Jews because according to this lawyer he's leading a sect and he has desecrated the temple by his teaching and by his deeds he is tearing down

Judaism do you remember what Jesus said about Paul back in Acts chapter 9 he would proclaim Jesus name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel and so here is Paul before Felix the Roman governor and the Jewish leaders and the lawyer to tell us has knelt down before him put a tee in the ground put a golf ball on that tee and said have a swing have a go so verse 10 when the governor motioned for him to speak Paul my translation pulled his driver out of the bag and stepped up to the tee I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation so I gladly make my defense defense point one

I am not bad news for Rome verse 11 you can easily verify that no more than 12 days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship my accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city and they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me Paul is making the point that he has not started riots and if you look back through the last few chapters of Acts you will know that it is not Paul who has been starting riots it's not being Christians he says Felix their accusations are baseless again we saw last week that when Paul is on trial it's actually the gospel of Jesus that's on trial the verdict for Paul is the verdict for the gospel of Jesus and Paul is making the case that the gospel of Jesus is not bad for Rome Christians are not the ones who are causing these unrests and from halfway through verse 18 he turns the table on his accusers he says there was no crowd with me nor was I involved in any disturbance but there are some

[25 : 23] Jews from the province of Asia who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin you see one thing that Roman authorities disliked was people who wasted the time of the courts to make an accusation and not back it up was frowned upon and Paul says that the Jews in Asia should be here if they are making claims about him and the people who are before him are in the same boat not only is Jesus not bad for Rome but the followers of Jesus are less trouble than his Jewish opponents are Paul and Jesus are not bad news for Rome defence item number one defence item number two I am not bad news for Israel verse 14 however I admit here we go here's someone who's in the dock about to admit to a charge what does he admit to however I admit that I worship the

God of our ancestors as a follower of the way which they call a sect I believe everything that is in accordance with the law and that is written in the prophets and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked so I strive always to keep my conscience clear between God and man I am living the truly Jewish life he continues verse 17 after an absence of several years I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this and so Paul says that what they call a sect that is an unfaithful small segment that's veering off from the truth what they call a sect is actually the truth of the

Jewish scriptures the Old Testament was pointing to a Messiah and it was pointing to an eternal hope of resurrection through him Jesus is the way that these prophecies have been fulfilled have come true in following Jesus Paul has not broken a single Jewish law or custom and in fact he is more Jewish than his Jewish opponents are because he has greater clarity about the resurrection last week we saw Paul sort of lobbed!

the theological hand grenade into the conversation between the Sadducees and the Pharisees and they started squabbling about that because the Pharisees do believe the resurrection and the Sadducees don't believe the resurrection in verse 21 he quotes himself from the Sanhedrin in that last chapter where he said there and he says again now it is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today now on the face of it that's just orthodox conventional Judaism the resurrection of the dead to affirm that the dead at the end of all days but Paul is pushing the point further he is saying there is no resurrection of the dead without Jesus resurrection so by bringing charges against him for following Jesus his Jewish opponents are cutting themselves off from the only path the only way to the general resurrection you can't be a part of true

Israel and deny Jesus Paul's second defense is that followers of the way are more Jewish than his opponents are in this trial the resurrection of Jesus is absolutely fundamental to the book of Acts and to the whole New Testament but especially to the book of Acts if Jesus did not bodily rise from the dead then the whole book is a complete nonsense there are some who claim to be Christians who will shrink back from the idea that Christ actually rose they will say things like well Christ rose in the hearts of his people to explain the sort of language of the New Testament but Acts won't allow that Christ rose bodily he ascended to heaven bodily he lives now at the right hand of the father as the

[30 : 31] God man who is interceding for his people orchestrating events this is his universe and because of all of that his gospel is unimpeachable you can't defeat it if you're a Jewish authority and you can't dismiss it if you're secular it is the fundamental truth of the world we live in that's the Christian claim and it stands up to the highest scrutiny because it is grounded in the historical event of Jesus resurrection Lauren and I have a dear friend back in Sydney who is struggling in her faith at the moment seems like she is deconstructing her Christianity little bit by little bit it is tremendously sad don't think that you never could by the way keep praying that Jesus will hold on to you but in addition to praying place the resurrection of Jesus at the very centre of your understanding of this world because it has implications for how you live how you think how you feel how you act in this world it makes the gospel unimpeachable and it builds courage in you as you seek to bear witness to Christ those are the two things that build courage the unseen hand and the unimpeachable gospel let's finish with our third point this is what threatens courage and it's the fact that Christ's truth is unsettling so Felix delays a verdict

Paul has come up he's taken the driver to the tee he's smacked it down the fairway and Felix delays his verdict until the commander comes and he hears Paul again so verse 24 of Acts 24 several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla who was Jewish he sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus as Paul talked about righteousness self-control and the judgment to come Felix was afraid and said that's enough for now you may leave when I find it convenient I will send for you you see if Jesus rose from the dead that means something when Paul speaks about faith in Christ Jesus it is a trust in Jesus as the Messiah who saved his people by dying and rising and then ascending if

Christ is risen it means he decides what righteous living looks like for this is his universe if Christ is risen you can't just do what you want you have to follow that path of righteousness exercising self control for this is the world that he rules and if Christ is risen then he will come again to judge the living and the dead for this is the world he rules so you would be wise to bow the knee now but that was too much for Felix and his wife it was unsettling we're told also that Felix wanted a bribe so he kept Paul in prison for the hope that he would get some cash now we know this man Felix from sources outside the Bible Antonius Felix was his formal name he reigned as the governor of

Judea from AD 52 to 59 before he was recalled to Rome at the end of that time for financial mismanagement not surprising that he tried to get a bribe but there was a brief moment the quickest of moments two years before his recall where he was allowing himself to be confronted by truth where he heard the truth of who Jesus is of whose world he actually lives in from the lips of Paul but it was too hard he took the easy way out he ran away from truth he returned to his comfort his usual practice of loving money didn't want to upset his Jewish wife perhaps now we can all understand Felix's reaction maybe you're here tonight and like Felix you are not a follower of Jesus and right now you have

Christ being held up to you and you are being faced with the cost of following Jesus it's unsettling it's unsettling because it changes everything what will people think if I take this seriously what will others say my family my boyfriend my colleagues the easy way out is to run away from truth don't come back to church return to form carry on living life as if you never actually heard any of it it takes courage to stand up and bear witness to Jesus but where does courage come from well if you look around this room we are not the gathering of the courageous courage does not come from inside of us it comes from

[36 : 48] Jesus who is by your side it comes from his unseen hand and a trust that in his universe he is working all things it comes from his unimpeachable gospel for if this book is correct then Jesus is alive and he is orchestrating the world and his gospel is the message of truth that cannot be shown to be false by anyone and he comes by your side so that as your world is unsettled you are never alone but you have him don't respond like Felix why not do two things instead pray Christian or not pray pray that Jesus would hold on to you continue to reveal himself to you the second thing tell someone that you want to keep thinking about this stuff that you don't end up running away

Christian or not pray tell someone you want to keep thinking about this in an intentional way let me lead us all in prayer father we thank you for Jesus we thank you because we do trust that right now Christ is with us as he has promised that surely he is with us always to the very end of the age so we trust that he is with us now and we pray that Jesus would hold on to us as his people that we might bear witness to him through wherever your sovereign hand takes us and we pray that all in the name of our risen Lord Jesus Amen