

“Courage from a Promise”

Acts 23:11-22

October 12, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

The last eight chapters of the book of Acts seem at first glance not to belong to the rest of the book. These chapters are all about Paul’s imprisonment, trials and legal defenses. Curiously, the same number of chapters, eight, are devoted to Paul’s three missionary trips. In a book that describes the growth of the church, why is so much attention given to Paul’s legal troubles? Luke did not set out to write a biography of the apostle Paul, but such a focus on Paul’s trials seems more appropriate to a biography. What is Luke’s reason for including this material?

I think there are at least three reasons. First, Luke wants to show us that the word of God cannot be shackled, even when its greatest missionary is shackled. While Paul is in prison, he is unable to plant a single church. But churches still get started. No single person, no matter how significant he has been in his work, is indispensable to the advancement of the gospel. God is the one who will see it through, and only he is indispensable. The same thing can be seen more recently with the rapid growth of Christianity in China. In 1949, when the Communists took power, less than 1% of China’s population was Christian. Now, the best estimates are that 130 million Chinese, about 10% of the population, are Christians. The missionaries may have left, but God didn’t.

Another reason Luke spends eight chapters on Paul’s legal troubles is probably his desire to show that Christianity was not an illegal movement. On the contrary, Paul is rescued repeatedly by the civil authorities. Whenever they examine the charges against him, they find no evidence of any crime.

The third reason for these final chapters is the one I want us to consider this morning. We are like Paul in that trouble is not unknown to us as God’s missionaries. Our troubles may be different than his, in that most of us probably won’t be arrested for our faithfulness to Jesus. But trouble will definitely come to us in this life from a variety of different sources. Many among us have encountered economic trouble in the last few weeks. Some have lost a large portion of the money set aside for retirement. Others have recently lost jobs or have reason to think a job loss might be on the near horizon. No matter its source, trouble is to be handled as Paul did, and in this passage we see him facing it down with the promise of God. In the middle of a desperate situation, Jesus comes to him with this word: **“Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome”** (v. 11). Though that specific promise is for Paul and not us, God has given us other

promises, by which we can be armed to face down the troubles of our lives. Let's look at three truths we learn here about using the promises of God in our lives.

I. The Power of a Promise

The promise recorded in verse 11 comes after Paul had experienced a series of setbacks following his recent arrival in Jerusalem. He was falsely accused by the Jews (21:28-29), beaten by them in an attempt to kill him (21:31), arrested by the Romans and threatened with torture (22:24), and taken before the Sanhedrin to hear their charges against him (22:30-23:10). He was caught between the strongest Jewish opposition he had ever faced and Roman authorities who only wanted peace in Israel and could easily see Paul as a disrupter of that peace, a crime of which the Jews accused him before the Roman authorities (24:5).

It is after these setbacks that Jesus comes to him in the stillness of the night. He brings with him the most powerful thing in the universe—a promise from his own lips. A promise is like a personal check. I have it within my power to write a check to this church for one-hundred thousand dollars. But the check would not be worth anything because there are not the funds in my account to back it up. A promise is exactly like that. Anyone can promise anything they want to promise, but the promise is only as good as the ability of the promise maker to back it up. A promise from Jesus is the most powerful thing in the universe simply because Jesus has been given all power and authority. No one has veto power over him. All things are known to him, with the result that he is never surprised by events that cause him to change his plans. Jesus comes to Paul with this promise that Paul will not die in Israel. He will survive to testify about Jesus in Rome.

Paul would need the encouragement of this promise for the events that happen the very next day. Forty of his enemies swear an oath to kill Paul before allowing themselves any food or drink. These are determined enemies. Their plan is to arrange for Paul to be sent again to the Sanhedrin for a further investigation of his case. But they will wait in ambush along the narrow streets of Jerusalem and make sure he never arrives. We get some idea of the significance of this threat in the response made by the Roman soldiers when they hear of it through Paul and his nephew. Two hundred soldiers are ordered to escort Paul to safety in Caesaria, about 60 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

So this was a very serious threat, and all that stood between Paul and a certain death were words. But it was enough, because they were the words of Jesus. A promise is only as good as the promise maker, and when Jesus is the promise maker, all is well. It is an easy thing for Jesus to keep his promise because all is known to him. He even knows the future before it happens. So he was aware of this conspiracy before the conspirators even met, and he arranged to have Paul's nephew come into the information of their scheme. Luke doesn't tell us the details of how he came to hear of their ambush, but there must have

been a series of little events that led to this. After all, conspirators don't publish their plans in the daily newspaper, but attempt to keep it as quiet as possible. Jesus was never troubled as to whether he would be able to deliver Paul. He never sat anxiously in heaven wondering if his enemies would prevail in thwarting his plans. The psalmist says that God's sovereign power is so great that he laughs at his enemies, even when they occupy the most powerful of positions. **"The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed... He who sits in the heavens laughs"** (Psalm 2:2,4). I was at someone's house this week and I saw in their front yard a cat with a chipmunk. The cat would pounce on the chipmunk and then remove its claws from it and even pretend not to be interested any longer. The chipmunk would take the opportunity to escape, which the cat at first seemed to allow. But the cat was in such complete control that it would only allow the chipmunk to get as far as the cat wanted before pouncing on it again. God's power is like that, but even greater. So his promise is enough because he is enough.

II. The Reception of a Promise

In order for God's promise to benefit us, it must be received by faith. How do you know whether or not you have received God's promise by faith? There are three indications I see in this passage that we have received the promise of Jesus by faith. First, we must be close enough to Jesus to hear his promise. The promise of Jesus comes first to our understanding. Note in verse 11 that Jesus stood by Paul, close to him, and then spoke to him. The first thing we must do is put ourselves in the place where we hear Jesus speak to us his word of promise. Where does he do that? He does it through his word, and you need to be reading God's word with an eye to what he promises you. He also does it through the preaching of the word that you hear from this church each week. There is a reason that a sermon is a monologue. It's not because I'm smarter than everyone else here, and that you need to receive the pearls of wisdom that come from my mouth. It's that we believe God speaks to his people through the preaching of his word, and there is a time to close one's mouth and open one's ears and just receive his promise.

The second indication that we have received his promise is that it leads to courage. Did you notice that Jesus says to Paul to **"take courage"**? Receiving God's promises starts with the understanding, but it can't end there. It must extend to our heart and emotions, to the point that it imparts courage to the heart. I came across an interesting verse in Revelation 21 this week. As John is given a vision of heaven, he hears the voice of God commenting on who will be in heaven and who will end up in **"the lake that burns with fire and sulfur"** (v. 8). There is a long list of the features that characterize those who end up in this place of condemnation. All the expected descriptions are there, including the murderers, the idolaters and the faithless. But none of those appear first on the

list. The very first quality of those who miss heaven is cowardice (v. 8). Unbelief leads to cowardice, while faith in God's promises leads to courage.

That brings us to another feature of this kind of faith that receives God's promises. It begins with the understanding, moves deep into our hearts and emotions in the form of courage, and then comes out in our actions. Notice that Paul doesn't receive Jesus' promise passively. He doesn't say, "Well, Jesus said that I will testify for him in Rome, so I needn't do anything about this threat of which my nephew has just informed me." When he hears the threat, he takes action that a normal person would take, sending his nephew to the tribune with this news.

Let's apply this now to an issue most of us are facing right now. Many have experienced a very serious erosion of their financial health in the recent past. I have been avoiding checking my own 401(k) plan, simply because there is nothing I would do about it anyway. I finally checked it two days ago to find that it had lost over 30% of its value just since March of this year. I know some of you have experienced even greater losses. In addition to investment losses, others have lost jobs or are living under the very real threat that your job may be lost to this economic downturn. How do we answer this threat and weather the economic storm? The same way we answer all threats, armed with a weapon more powerful than any on the planet—the promise of Jesus. What does God promise to us regarding our finances? There are many in God's word. Let me mention just one. In Philippians 4:19 we read, **"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."** Receive that promise from God. You may need to repent of fear and cowardice and passivity, because if you have fallen into one of these, you have not been believing God's promise to you. You can repent because of the kindness of God through Jesus. He stands ready to forgive and to heal. But what can we expect of God in this? What exactly is he promising to do for us when he says that he will supply every need of ours? The answer to that question brings us to our next point.

III. The Result of a Promise

What strikes me about God's fulfilling of his promise that Paul would live to testify to Jesus in Rome is how ordinary the deliverance was. God had delivered Paul in the past through earthquakes and prison doors being miraculously opened. But here it was through a young man coming into some knowledge about a conspiracy to murder Paul. And it was through the repeated interventions of pagan civil authorities that Paul was rescued. Sometimes we miss God's deliverances of us because we are looking for something like an earthquake, while God sends something far more ordinary. Have you heard about the Christian who was driving around a full parking lot praying for God to provide him with a parking space? He then spotted one opening up and said to God, "Never mind, I found one myself."

Not only was God's deliverance ordinary instead of extraordinary, it was also lengthy in time rather than instantaneous. God could obviously have delivered in one moment, as he did when Paul was in jail in Philippi. But in this case it was several years of imprisonment, trials, and a long journey by sea that included a shipwreck before Paul would arrive safely in Rome in fulfillment of God's promise.

If we understand that God sometimes fulfills his promises to us in ordinary and lengthy ways, then we will trust him to do as he says he will do and in the manner of his choice. We will trust him for both the "what" and the "how". In other words, we will trust him to fulfill his promises in his ways. So, for example, some of you are trusting God to provide your needs after you have lost a great deal of money in the financial markets. That is exactly what you should do. But you need to be careful to trust him also in the way he chooses to provide for your needs. It may be that he will choose to do so in a way other than restoring to you a healthy balance in your 401(k) program. He may provide through a significant lifestyle change on your part, or through working longer than you had planned, or through downsizing a house or through a large number of other possibilities. There is a fullness of mercy from God even in the way he delivers us. If he delivers you from some economic troubles by requiring you to work longer than you had planned, God will multiply the good in your life through that work. We must not script for God how we would like for him to fulfill his promises to us. Faith in God's promise, no matter how he chooses to provide, gives us great contentment and courage. We are content because we are willing to receive whatever God provides and not demand more or different provisions. It provides us with great courage simply because we are delivered from fear.

CONCLUSION:

One of the great promises of the Bible occurred when God commanded Abraham to offer his son, Isaac, in sacrifice to God. Abraham did not tell Isaac of God's command. So after all the preparations had been made for the sacrifice, Isaac, still in the dark about God's command, asked his father a question. **"Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"** Abraham replied, **"God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son"** (Gen. 22:7-8). Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide," because God did provide the animal to stand in the place of Isaac as that day's sacrifice. The ultimate fulfillment of that promise is our Lord Jesus. God has provided for us in Christ. He has provided full and complete forgiveness in Christ. He has provided a bright future for us and a reason to live. Even in the hard times like many are experiencing now, God provides for us the blessing of a more Christlike character. I invite you to repent of any cowardice and fear and instead to trust God and move out into life with courage and faith.