

Words and Deeds: Take Courage!
By Jason Huff
July 21, 2019
Joshua 1:1-9; Mark 6:45-51; Acts 23:11-35

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 23:11-35. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy, perfect, and sacred Word. "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 the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than forty men were involved in this plot. They went to the chief priests and 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 are ready to kill him before he gets here."

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: "The 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 forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request." The commander dismissed the young man and cautioned him, "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 two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. Provide mounts for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix." He wrote a letter as follows: "Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him."

So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris. The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him. The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, he said, "I will hear your case when your accusers get here." Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace."

Understanding courage is harder than I thought. I looked through a bunch of sources this week talking about courage, and lots of cultures have various ways of telling people how to have courage. One of the most famous is from Shakespeare, in the tragedy *Macbeth*. Macbeth has having second thoughts about fulfilling a prophecy where he would rise to the throne of Scotland by murdering King Duncan. His ambitious wife tells him, “Screw your courage to the sticking place.” The “sticking place” was the point where you’d tie a string to a crossbow so tight that it could fire a bolt. Lady Macbeth was basically telling her husband, “Don’t back out on me now!”

There are different phrases like this, such as “take your courage in both hands” or “have the courage of your convictions” or “pluck up your courage.” If you’re really scared and you aren’t sure you can go through with your plans, you can get some help from Dutch courage or liquid courage – both the same thing. In German, the idiom to take courage literally translates “tear yourself together.” In Polish, it’s “we take ourselves into our fist.”

I also looked into the difference between bravery and courage. Bravery is going into difficulty or danger or pain without any fear. Some people are naturally brave – just fearless. They live for adrenaline. They almost thrive on pushing their limits. There’s a fine line between being brave and being foolish. Bravery doesn’t look before leaping into danger.

Courage is undertaking the same risks, the same challenges as being brave, through very real and unavoidable fear. Courage is seeing your best friend cut down in a war and yet soldiering on to take the enemy hill. Courage is knowing the odds aren’t in your favor but moving forward because of love or compassion. Courage is doing something that is personally very difficult knowing that the cause is worth it.

Today’s passage puts Paul in the biggest crosshairs he’s been in yet, but once again, the Lord sees him through in amazing fashion. As we take a closer look, we can learn what real courage looks like, how courage plays a part in the gospel, and what courage looks like for the modern Christian.

When we last saw Paul two weeks ago, he was pulled out of a meeting of the Sanhedrin by Roman soldiers after he caused a massive disagreement between the Pharisees and Sadducees and nearly got himself torn apart in the process. This was essentially the third time the Romans had Paul’s back as he tried to explain to the Jewish people and their leadership why he was now an apostle for Christ. He was put in chains and narrowly escaped death by interrogation because of his status as a Roman citizen. Christians who met Paul had prophesied that he would be arrested and jailed for his faith, but Paul was willing to die for Jesus in Jerusalem if that was what God wanted.

But what was coming next was far more sinister and far more dangerous than anything he had previously faced. 40 Jewish men had bound themselves with an oath to kill Paul, vowing not to eat or drink until they’d done the deed. And this was an audacious vow, because their plot involved getting the Sanhedrin to lie to the commander about having Paul sent to them and then ambushing him on the way. Paul was still under Roman protection, so the plot would have involved taking down members of the Roman legion at the same time.

What made them so dangerous was that, unlike the riots that had occurred before surrounding Paul, this was a calculated, planned attack with men literally putting their lives on the line to murder Paul. This was serious business. The Sicarri, which translated to “the dagger men,” were a Jewish splinter group considered to be one of the very first organized assassination groups in history. Long before there were ninjas, there were sicarri.

The Sicarri planned attacks on Romans and anyone considered to be a Roman sympathizer. Paul, both a Roman citizen and the preacher of the gospel to the pagan Gentiles all over the region, definitely qualified. Whether these men were officially dagger men or not, they were very active during this time period. (Some people believe that the traitor Judas Iscariot got his last name not from growing up in the city of Kerioth, which is one possibility, but from being one of the very first sicarri. Both are possible.) The point is, there were men trained to do this in the vicinity who would have very easily carried this out. Paul was in very real danger.

But God knows all of this; in fact, He comforts Paul well before these men have even thought up their scheme. The night before they make their plans, Jesus appears to Paul. That’s amazing in its own right. Jesus comes and, if we take the Greek literally, stands with Paul, beside Paul. Jesus is in the Roman barracks with him. Not only is God omnipotent, knowing all, even before it happens; not only is He sovereign, decreeing what will and will not happen regardless of our plans; God is with us, and He is with Paul in this dark moment.

Jesus lets Paul know that this isn’t the end at all. Paul had been Jesus’ loyal witness in Jerusalem; now he must do the same in Rome. Christ will make sure it comes to pass. But there are many obstacles ahead; believe it or not, the sicarri will be the easiest one to deal with! So Jesus comes to strengthen Paul. And in the Greek, He does so with a single word – *tharsei*, or “courage.” The tense of the word means that Paul is being instructed to have it, so “take courage” or “have courage” is a good translation.

But this word *tharsei* is an encouragement. It often means something like, “take heart.” When a bunch of men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus, Jesus saw their faith and said, “*Tharsei*, son, your sins are forgiven.” When a bleeding woman came and touched the edge of Jesus’ cloak believing that just that alone would heal her, Jesus turned to her and said, “*Tharsei*, daughter, your faith has saved you.” When Jesus walks across the water to the disciples in their boat, they are terrified and think they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus tells them, “*Tharseite!* It’s me! Don’t be afraid.” And at the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples, “In the world you will have trouble and tribulation. But *tharseite!* I have overcome the world.”

The question is, why does Paul need to hear this? He’s stated that he’s willing to die for Jesus, and there’s no reason to believe it’s not true – he’s been in hard situations before. I think it’s because everyone hits their breaking point somewhere down the line. Jesus is encouraging Paul for all the threats and suffering about to come. God uses people who have lost their bravery and courage an awful lot. Moses muscles up to an Egyptian slavedriver, kills him – then retreats into the desert for 40 years. When God calls upon him to back and free his people, after making a lot of excuses, Moses says, “Please just send someone else.”

Joshua was one of Moses' right-hand men. He alone with Caleb survived the 40 year sojourn in the wilderness because of his faithfulness. But he saw the double-minded treachery of his own people against Moses' leadership, and he was one of the spies who had seen just how tall and strong the people of Canaan really were. When Moses dies and the task of taking over the Promised Land comes, God has to remind Joshua several times, "be strong and courageous."

Gideon, one of Israel's judges, is greeted by an angel who says, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior!" It's ironic because Gideon is threshing wheat in a winepress because he's so scared of the Midianites. He has excuse after excuse, and he tests God twice to make certain that what he has been told is really from the Lord. But with only 300 men and the promise of God, despite his fear, Gideon routes his enemies.

David was brave. His bold stand against Goliath shows his amazing faith in God. It shows the fearlessness of a 16-year-old boy. But as David grew up and was surrounded by enemies, when he found his most dangerous enemy is the king he has sworn to protect, he has to grow in courage. The psalms record David's cries for God to save him while wolves surround him on every side. Many psalms are written out of a place of deep fear. And yet David time and again shows immense courage in doing God's will rather than going the easy route.

God uses scared, timid, yet faithful people and gives them courage. And if anyone shows us the real meaning of courage, it's Jesus. Jesus, of all people, knew every reason to be afraid of the cross. Because the universe was made through Him, He knew exactly the agony He would face – every moment of suffering, every terrifying step towards Golgotha. Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane shows His immense courage in going up against this kind of death.

In Hebrews 12:2, we find out what gave Him that courage – "the joy set before Him." Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. The joy of saving His people, of bringing us before God cleansed of our sins and forgiven all our unrighteousness, of bringing us into the Kingdom of God to be His brothers and sisters, that gave Him the encourage to endure the cross.

The Good News, the gospel that Jesus has come to save and redeem us, to make us anew into the people of heaven, shows us what true courage looks like. Jesus has countless opportunities to take shortcuts, to gain thousands and thousands of followers, to make Himself into an earthly king, yet He courageously abandons every road but the road of suffering and denial of self laid out before Him – the road that will make Him the perfect sacrifice to save us.

Difficult roads lie ahead. But *tharsei!* Take courage! Take heart! Be of good cheer! God has overcome the world. You can do great things for God's Kingdom, far greater than you though possible. God knew before the creation of the world all you would face and all you could overcome with the gift of faith in His Son and the gift of the Holy Spirit living in your heart.

We got the privilege this week of seeing young men and women show incredible courage in Cincinnati this last week. Now none of them were facing down an ambush by 40 dagger men. But they did handle an amazing number of difficulties. Our first day, my team of teenagers faced down 90+ degree heat to cut down an overgrown backyard and weed a yard for its 86-year-old owner who could have lost her home if she hadn't found someone to help her keep it up.

Catha's team helped residents at a nursing home so well that the staff said they were the best group they'd seen all week. Mackenzy and Montana helped make meals for several thousand children in the Cincinnati area every day. Darnell sorted clothes and mixed paint and matched pairs of shoes so that people in need internationally could have basic needs met. They'll tell you more of their story in a couple of weeks.

What they did wasn't dangerous, but it was a ton of work and a lot of discomfort and getting way outside their comfort zones; it meant sacrificing a week of summer, sleeping in a hallway on a hard floor, a total lack of privacy, and tasks that were uncomfortable – if you know of teenagers who think it's fun and easy to visit folks in a nursing home or to sort clothes or make meals several hours a day, let me know! But they took heart, they took courage, they did the jobs, and they learned a lot about themselves and their relationship with God in the process.

Tharsei! God is with you. He is leading you down the narrow path of His will. Take heart! If you have faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord, He has already saved you; all you have to do is live like it. Be courageous! Nothing in this world can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Not pain, not heartache, not struggle, not doctor's bills or utility bills or auto insurance or wayward kids or difficult in-laws, nothing God asks you to do, nothing God desires you to become, is going to be too much for you to bear because just as Christ was standing by Paul then, He stands by you now. Paul saw Him right there beside Him; we might not. But with His Holy Spirit in our lives, we know that visible or invisible, He is there.

The rest of this passage is just proof of God working everything out for His glory and for Paul's benefit. We learn that Paul has a sister, and by the providence of God, Paul's little nephew hears of the plot. Probably someone's dad told his son and his son mentioned it to his friends and Paul's nephew found out. He's young enough that the Roman commander takes him by the hand, probably because meeting with a Roman commander was kind of terrifying. He has no reason to lie about the plan against poor Uncle Paul, and the commander believes the news.

He sends nearly 500 men to guard Paul on an unexpected late night journey. Once they reach safety, 70 horsemen get Paul to Governor Felix in Caesarea with a note from the commander. It's pretty funny to listen to how the commander wrote about himself – "I came with my troops and rescued Paul for I had learned he was a Roman citizen." He somehow fails to mention that he had Paul put in chains and nearly had Paul beaten to death before he learned that Paul was a Roman. Funny that! But the good news is, Paul is safe for the moment, and under guard in Herod's own palace. He may be a prisoner, but now he's in a king's home, a long way from the Roman barracks. Despite the men determined to kill him, Paul can take heart – God has saved him from the dagger men.

This week, know that if you have trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation and have given your life over to God, if you now live for Him, you can take courage. The God of the universe is in your court. Whatever you face, God is bigger. He will see you through.