

Continuing Through Opposition

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God strengthens His people facing opposition for the gospel through His presence.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Acts 21:15–23:35

Every July 4th in the United States of America, citizens across the nation celebrate Independence Day. People have barbecues, enjoy firework displays, and take time to express appreciation for the freedoms citizens of the United States enjoy. It's not as if these freedoms are available only on the Fourth of July, but rather, this is the one day out of the year Americans intentionally celebrate their freedom.



How do you and your family celebrate the freedoms you enjoy?

Group Time

Point 1: Paul is opposed because of the hope of the resurrection (Acts 22:30; 23:6-9).

^{22:30} The next day, since he wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and instructed the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to convene. He brought Paul down and placed him before them.

.....

^{23:6} When Paul realized that one part of them were Sadducees and the other part were Pharisees, he cried out in the Sanhedrin, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am being judged because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead!”

⁷ When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, and neither angel nor spirit, but the Pharisees affirm them all.

⁹ The shouting grew loud, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees’ party got up and argued vehemently, “We find nothing evil in this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?”

The Roman commander wanted to understand the situation he had rushed into by arresting Paul to protect him from a Jewish mob (Acts 21:15–22:29). Since the tension, rage, and accusations were coming from Paul’s Jewish countrymen, the commander wanted Jewish authorities to determine Paul’s cause for trial and potential punishment.

Paul recognized that although he was being put on trial, it wasn’t a fair one (23:1-5). So Paul chose to divide rather than discuss. He raised the issue of resurrection, which the Pharisees affirmed and the Sadducees denied. Here he spoke in general of the future resurrection of God’s people, but elsewhere Paul proclaimed boldly the resurrection of Jesus, which secures our future resurrection.

Resurrection: Both the Old and New Testaments teach that one day believers will experience a resurrection of the _____ from the dead. The promise of the resurrection is found in the resurrection of _____ from the dead, and it will take place at the future _____ of Christ.



Why are the resurrection and the supernatural, in general, such controversial subject matters to talk about?

Point 2: Paul is strengthened through the Lord's presence (Acts 23:10-11).

¹⁰ When the dispute became violent, the commander feared that Paul might be torn apart by them and ordered the troops to go down, take him away from them, and bring him into the barracks. ¹¹ The following night, the Lord stood by him and said, "Have courage! For as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so it is necessary for you to testify in Rome."

Once again, Paul was rescued by the Roman commander. The danger and unrest throughout Jerusalem because of Paul's presence threatened Paul's life, and the safest place he could be seemed to be in Roman custody. How disheartening this must have been for Paul. He eagerly desired to see his countrymen come to faith in the resurrected Christ, but his efforts were so often frustrated and violently rejected because people, by nature, love the darkness rather than the light (John 3:19). The gospel unifies those who believe in Jesus, but it divides the world.



How have you seen the gospel bring division between people?

In the midst of chaos and persecution, God provided Paul with space to be alone so he could be recharged by a tangible encounter with His presence. Time alone with God in the midst of confusing and stressful circumstances provides us with the strength we need to keep on keeping on. The Lord didn't promise Paul a way out of his predicament but prepared him for a future stage of his ministry. As Paul had preached Christ in Jerusalem, so he would do in Rome, and because God is truthful, Paul had every reason to have courage in the midst of his hardship.



Voices from Church History

"Why didn't [Jesus] appear to [Paul] before he fell into danger? Because, as always, it is in afflictions that God consoles. For then he appears more desirable, as he trains us even in the midst of dangers."¹

—Chrysostom (c. 349-407)

God Is Truthful: The Scriptures are clear that in God there is no falsehood. God represents things as they really are. _____ He says can be trusted because God guarantees the truth of everything He tells us. The call for humans to be _____ and not to bear false witness is rooted in the utter truthfulness of our Creator.

Point 3: Paul is protected through surprising means (Acts 23:12-17,22-24).

¹² When it was morning, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who had formed this plot. ¹⁴ These men went to the chief priests and elders and said, “We have bound ourselves under a solemn curse that we won’t eat anything until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ So now you, along with the Sanhedrin, make a request to the commander that he bring him down to you as if you were going to investigate his case more thoroughly. But, before he gets near, we are ready to kill him.”

¹⁶ But the son of Paul’s sister, hearing about their ambush, came and entered the barracks and reported it to Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the commander, because he has something to report to him.”

.....

²² So the commander dismissed the young man and instructed him, “Don’t tell anyone that you have informed me about this.”

²³ He summoned two of his centurions and said, “Get two hundred soldiers ready with seventy cavalry and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight.

²⁴ Also provide mounts to ride so that Paul may be brought safely to Felix the governor.”

Despite being in Roman custody, Paul remained under threat; this time from a conspiracy to assassinate him. Paul knew God had a plan for him to preach Christ in Rome, but how would he survive to get to Rome when forty plus Jews committed themselves to his murder? God will always accomplish His will (Acts 21:14).



What are some reasons we know God will accomplish His will?

God provided Paul with a large military escort to Caesarea to rescue him from the assassination plot. Perhaps the commander did not want the murder of a Roman citizen on his watch, but whatever the human reason, God held fast to protecting Paul so the gospel would continue to spread. God’s plan for Paul was greater than the Jews’ plans to kill him. Truly, “if God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom. 8:31).



How have you seen the Lord work in surprising ways?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Acts 21:15-25

Paul visited with James, the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem church, and the elders there. Paul shared with them praise reports from his time on the mission field. It's always encouraging to hear how God is moving by saving those who were lost and maturing those who are in Christ.

Sometimes it's easier for us to share prayer requests than praise reports. A prayer request is simply something we want others to join us in prayer about. A praise report is a moment when we share the great things God is doing in our lives. It builds the faith of other believers when we hear how God is working in the lives of other saints both locally and globally.

The temptation in a praise report is to direct the praise to ourselves. After all, we have labored, traveled, proclaimed, and sacrificed. But God is the One worthy of all praise, so let us be honest and direct all praise to Him. May we be obedient servants doing our duty with sincerity, love, and joy, and may we honor our Lord and Savior above all (Luke 17:10).

Voices from the Church

"God wouldn't be Himself if He could not do the impossible. Before time, He's done it, and when time becomes a distant memory used only to reminisce, He will always be doing what no one can: be God. The God who does the miraculous. And we can be sure that the salvation of a sinner is the greatest miracle the world could ever see."³

—Jackie Hill Perry



What praise reports can you share with other believers this week?

Day 2: Read Acts 21:26–22:29

While in Jerusalem, Paul took the opportunity to answer one of the objections his Jewish countrymen had regarding him—that he disparaged the Law of Moses. This, of course, was not true. Rather, Paul saw the law in a new light—the light of Christ, who came to fulfill the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17).

The appearance of Jesus to Paul on the road to Damascus blinded his eyes but it also illuminated his heart, and he now began to see things the way God intended. The law no longer held him captive to an unachievable righteousness but directed his eyes to the perfect, saving righteousness that is in Christ. The blinding light of Christ changed the direction of Paul's mission. No longer would Paul seek to punish followers of the Way but he would risk punishment for the chance to proclaim Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life. And those who were once unclean and out of reach—Gentiles—were now welcome to hear and believe the good news, just as the law and the prophets intended (Isa. 42:6; 49:6).



How has the light of Christ changed your perspective on life?

Day 3: Read Acts 22:30–23:9

It hurts to be accused falsely, and it's embarrassing when false accusations go public. Could you imagine someone with a large social media following all of a sudden publicly targeting you with false accusations? What if the population at large began to believe this person and you started trending as public enemy number one? This would be something akin to what Paul was facing in his day.

The good news, however, is God remained with Paul before, during, and after all of the slander he endured. It didn't matter what Paul's accusers said of him, or even what the public at large thought. What mattered was how God viewed Paul. Because of his understanding of his acceptance in Christ before God (Rom. 5:1), we can be pretty sure he slept well at night, so to speak, knowing he possessed the righteousness of Jesus by faith and no amount of slander could take that away.



How can you find encouragement when facing slander and disdain from others?

Day 4: Read Acts 23:10-11

God had a plan for Paul, and what God decrees will always come to pass (see Isa. 46:9-10; Eph. 1:10). As we see here, Roman soldiers protected Paul from harm and death, but God is the One who sends protection. He also is the One who reveals His plan in His time. Cutting through the chaos, the Lord spoke to Paul directly and told him that he would indeed testify about Him in Rome, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ who saves sinners through faith. Paul had to make the decision to trust God's word, believing that he would make it out of Jerusalem safe and sound. But even if he struggled with that faith, the Lord remains faithful to His people and His plan.

We must remember that although God promised Paul he would make it to Rome, God did not give him all the details of what his journey there would look like. In our lives, God may tell us about our destination, yet He may not reveal our path there either. This is why we must keep on trusting God during the journey.



In what ways is God calling you to trust Him during your journey through life?

Day 5: Read Acts 23:12-35

Sometimes it's hard to see the road ahead because of the turns, which prevent us from knowing what lies ahead. In this text we see Paul face a similar situation. How would he reach Rome? People were plotting to kill him. What if a mob of people wanted you dead so badly they were plotting with creativity the ways they were going to kill you? This would be enough to make one feel scared, helpless, and vulnerable.

Yet as we read, we see that God's plans for Paul would not be thwarted by humans, no matter how much they plotted. God remained in control of Paul's life, not the conspirators. God is the One who orders our steps, even when we face the schemes of people who want to harm us. God is the One who protects us. We should not fear those who could harm our body only; instead, we should fearfully respect the One who can destroy both our body and soul (Matt. 10:28). Yet if we are in Christ, we can rest assured that God will never seek to destroy us because Jesus has removed God's wrath from us (Rom. 8:1). Rather, God lovingly protects us in life and in death as a father protects his children because that is what we are to Him (1 John 3:1).



What is the Lord calling you to do, trusting in His care and protection?

