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THE UPS AND DOWNS OF WITNESSING

Acts 22:23-23:11

By

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Acts Lesson 59

The Ups and Downs of Witnessing Acts 22:23-23:11

If you have been a Christian for very long, you have blown it as a witness. I still remember an incident during my sophomore year of college (a *long* time ago!). I was taking a group discussion class. Each group was evaluated by our classmates. To get good evaluations, we would choose controversial subjects to arouse interest: sexual issues, drug use, etc. On every issue, I was the conservative member of the group.

There was a guy in our group named Ralph. On every issue, he took the libertarian side of things. He was in favor of free sex, homosexuality, experimenting with drugs, and every other issue that I was opposed to. One day after class, Ralph looked me in the eye and asked, "Hey, man, are you for real, or are you just putting us on in there?" Instantly I knew that this was an opportunity to tell Ralph about Christ, but I was tongue-tied. All I could do was mumble, "Yeah, I'm really that way." I felt terrible, knowing that I had failed the Lord.

That failure led me first, to pray for Ralph over the years when he has come to mind, that God would save him in spite of my failure. Also, it led me to get some training in how to share my faith. But in spite of all of the training and the books that I've read on the subject over the years since then, I still find that witnessing is an up and down sort of thing. Sometimes I do okay, but sometimes I still don't do so well.

Paul's story here should encourage every Christian in the ups and downs of witnessing. Even though Paul probably could have handled things better than he did, the Lord graciously appeared to him when he was discouraged and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also" (23:11). The lesson is,

If we will speak out for Christ, even if we blow it,
He will graciously encourage us and give us
further opportunities to speak out for Him.

In Acts 22:1-22, Paul had taken the opportunity to preach to the Jewish mob that had tried to kill him. They listened until he told them how the Lord told him to leave Jerusalem, which would not accept his witness, and go to the Gentiles. At the mention of the word "Gentiles," the crowd went wild, like a pack of wolves trying to get to their prey.

Since Paul had been preaching in Aramaic, which the Roman commander probably did not understand very well, he didn't know what had set the mob off again, but he was determined to find out. He brought Paul into the barracks and was going to examine him by torture to get it out of him. Scourging was a brutal punishment of beating a man on his bare back with a leather-thonged whip that had pieces of metal or bone attached to it. It would leave a man severely crippled and could result in death. This was the treatment that Pilate inflicted on Jesus just prior to the crucifixion. As the soldiers stretched Paul out to tie him for the beating, he asked the centurion, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?" (22:25). Paul was exercising his legal right to protect himself from persecution, and there is nothing wrong with doing that.

The centurion quickly informed the commander of the situation. Alarmed, the commander came to Paul and discovered that he was indeed a Roman citizen. In fact, Paul was born a citizen, whereas the commander had obtained his citizenship by paying a large sum of money. Since it could have cost him his position to scourge a Roman citizen without a trial, the commander quickly had Paul untied.

But since he was responsible to maintain peace in Jerusalem, the commander still wanted to find out what was going on between Paul and the Jews. So he called together the Jewish Sanhedrin and brought Paul in before them to get to the bottom of this conflict (so he thought). But it wasn't long until the Council itself erupted in such an uproar among themselves in response to something that Paul had said, that the commander again had to rescue this troublesome man! This story teaches us three main lessons:

1. We all are responsible to speak out for Jesus Christ when He gives us opportunities.

If you have trusted in Christ as Savior, then you *are* His witness. You may not always be a *good* witness, but His name is identified with you, so that by your actions, attitudes, and words, you *are* a witness for Him. As He gives you opportunities, you should bear verbal witness. As 1 Peter 3:15-16 exhorts us, “But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.” In 22:1-22, Paul had given his *defense* (22:1) with a *good conscience* (23:1).

Paul’s experience teaches us three practical lessons:

- We should always be alert for opportunities to speak out for Christ.

Paul had just been mobbed and badly beaten, but when he got rescued, his first thought was to address the crowd and tell them about Jesus. When he stood before the Jewish Council, again he would attempt to tell them about his experience with Christ, although he didn’t get very far. When later he would have audiences with the Roman governors, he would tell them about Christ.

This didn’t just happen by chance, or because Paul was a natural preacher. In 1 Corinthians 9:22-23, he explains, “I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it.” It was a matter of deliberate purpose or aim. If we want to imitate Paul in obedience to our Lord, we need to make it our frequent prayer, “Lord, give me opportunities to speak out for You, and give me the words to say when the opportunities come.”

- We should know what to say in advance so that we can bear witness effectively.

As we saw last week, Paul basically shared his testimony: his life before conversion; his conversion; and his life afterwards. Even if you don’t have a dramatic story (as I do not), you can tell people what God has done for your soul and what He will do for them. Beyond that, you should be armed with the basic facts of the gospel and the accompanying Scriptures to present it clearly. Learn some simple illustrations that help to clarify. Learn how to respond

to the common objections that people raise. Much of our fear of witnessing is that we don't know what to say. Some basic training can offset that fear.

- Our lives should back up our words.

Paul begins his witness to the Jerusalem Council by saying, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day" (23:1). He will later tell Felix, "I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men" (24:16). He told the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:4), "For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord."

Some have wondered how Paul could say such things in light of his record of persecuting the church and other sins. But to have a good conscience before God does not mean to have lived perfectly, but to live openly, confessing our sins and turning from them when God convicts us of them. Also, our conscience must be informed by God's Word or it will be a faulty guide. Paul was acting in good conscience when he persecuted the church (1 Tim. 1:13), but he was terribly wrong because his conscience was informed more by his Jewish culture than by the Scriptures. If a person deliberately violates his conscience repeatedly, it will lead to a seared conscience (1 Tim. 4:2), insensitive to all wrongdoing. It is only the blood of Christ applied to our hearts that gives us a clean conscience (Heb. 10:22; 1 Pet. 3:21).

But the point is, if we speak out for Christ, we should not be aware of any wrong that we have committed, either against God or men, that we have not repented of and made right. Otherwise, our witness will be used against the Lord and the gospel, because unbelievers will shrug us off as hypocrites. If you are not seeking to maintain a clear conscience before God and men, please do not let anyone know that you believe in Jesus! And, you may want to examine yourself to see whether you truly do believe in Him!

2. Sometimes when we speak out for the Lord, we will blow it or things will not go as we had hoped.

If you haven't blown it witnessing, you must not be witnessing! But you can't let the fear of saying the wrong thing keep you

from saying anything. You learn from your mistakes and you trust God to overrule and use your mistakes for His purpose.

Paul began his witness before the Council by looking intently at them, which probably involved both eye contact and trying to read their faces. Facial expressions and body language can tell you a lot about where people are at. I've had people in church sit with their arms folded, glaring at me with a grim expression on their faces. I don't need a Ph.D. in communication to realize that they are not friendly toward my message! Then Paul made his opening statement about living with a good conscience before God. The Greek verb translated "lived my life" means to live as a citizen. In this context it has reference to Paul's life as a Jew in the Jewish theocracy. He is denying the charge leveled against him of bringing a Gentile into the exclusively Jewish section of the temple.

We can't be sure where Paul was heading from there. Perhaps he would have gone on to show them how even though he had been sincere in persecuting the Christians, he had been sincerely wrong. From there he could have appealed to them to acknowledge their errors, however sincerely they had made them. But Paul didn't get a chance to go further, because Ananias, the high priest, ordered those standing beside Paul to strike him on the mouth.

Remember, Paul had just been badly beaten by the angry mob. His face was probably sore and bruised. The blow must have both shocked Paul and hurt terribly. Also, the high priest's command was grossly unjust and revealed that he was not interested in justice, but only in getting Paul condemned. Ananias was a notoriously corrupt high priest. According to Josephus, he stole from the common priests and used violence and political power to further his goals. The Jewish nationalists hated him because of his pro-Roman leaning. During the Jewish revolt against Rome, some Jewish loyalists assassinated him.

As soon as he was hit, Paul shot back, "God is going to strike you, you white-washed wall! And do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?" (23:3). When some bystanders expressed their shock that Paul would thus revile the high priest, Paul replied that he had not been aware that he was the high priest, and admitted his error by citing

Exodus 22:28: "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people." Scripture commands us to respect the office, if not the man.

The puzzling question is, why didn't Paul know that Ananias was the high priest? Three answers have been proposed, none of which are completely satisfying. Some say that Paul's eyesight was so bad that he could not see who had given the order for him to be struck. Verse one seems to contradict this, unless you take "looking intently" to mean that he squinted at them without being able to see them clearly. But even if he couldn't see, wouldn't Paul have known that the command came from the leader of the Council?

A second view is that Paul was being sarcastic, saying in effect, "He was acting so contrary to the character of a high priest that I didn't recognize him." The problem with this view is that his Scripture quotation seems to acknowledge his wrongdoing.

The third view is that Paul had been gone from Jerusalem so long that he didn't know who the high priest was. But even if he didn't know Ananias by sight, he should have known that the leader of the Council was the high priest. So we really don't know why Paul didn't recognize him, but we have to take his word for it that he did not. The lesson for us to apply is:

- When we blow it and realize our error, we should be quick to admit it and correct our mistake.

If we stonewall it, we'll only reinforce people's prejudice that Christians are phonies and hypocrites. If we confess our mistakes, people will get the message, Christians are not perfect, but they are willing to admit their mistakes and make things right. Perhaps they will learn that there is reality in walking with God.

When we lived in California, we had a collie that for some unknown reason went crazy with barking at our neighbor's truck when he drove by. One morning, the neighbor reached his limit. When Christa, who was about 12, went outside to calm the dog, the neighbor yelled at her, using some foul language. I'd like to think that if he had yelled at me, I would have remained calm. But using foul language on my 12-year-old daughter pushed my "Defend-your-daughter" button, and I got really mad. I went outside and told him to keep his foul mouth shut and we exchanged some angry words.

This happened on a Sunday morning, just before I left for church! As I walked out to go to church, the neighbor and his daughter's boyfriend, who lived with her there, drove by. They were glaring at me and looking menacing. I held up my hand to stop them. They screeched to a halt and jumped out of the truck with their fists clenched, ready for a fight. Again I held up my hand and said, "I'm sorry that I yelled at you a few minutes ago. I was wrong. Please forgive me." Instantly, the neighbor melted and offered an apology for his own wrongs. After that, we always waved in a friendly manner to each other.

That neighbor probably knew that I am a pastor. If I had not asked forgiveness for my wrong response, it only would have reinforced his negative bias against Christians. I pray that the Lord used my confession to open the way for the gospel to come through to him through some other means. That's a second lesson:

- When things do not go as we had hoped, we must trust God to use it anyway.

After his admission of wrong, Paul took another tack. Perceiving that some of the Council were ardent Pharisees and some were equally ardent Sadducees, Paul cried out, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" (23:6). This led to a free-for-all among the Council. As Luke explains for his non-Jewish readers, the Sadducees deny the resurrection, angels, and spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. So the Pharisees immediately came to Paul's defense, while the Sadducees attacked them and Paul. The commander, who probably wondered why everyone was in such an uproar, finally had to rescue Paul by force again.

Scholars debate whether Paul was right or wrong to use this tactic to divide the Council and deliver himself. Some accuse him of using deceit (claiming still to be a Pharisee) to save his own neck. If that was Paul's scheme, then he was wrong. Others say that he knew that he would never get a fair trial before the Sanhedrin, and that they were too hostile to listen to the gospel. Thus he used this ploy to deliver himself from certain condemnation.

But it's also possible that Paul's intent was to use his background as a Pharisee to establish a common ground with the Phari-

sees who were present, and then to try to move from there to bear witness to Jesus' resurrection and the gospel. If this was his intent, his strategy didn't work out as he had hoped.

Whatever Paul's intent, we've all had times when we tried a certain approach in witnessing, but it did not go as we had hoped. Perhaps the person reacted in an unexpected way and told us that he never wanted us to talk to him about religion again. At that point, all we can do is trust God to use our feeble attempt, and to remember that God doesn't need perfect disciples to accomplish His sovereign plan. To say this is not to excuse our weaknesses, but rather to exalt God's greatness and power.

Thus we all are responsible to speak out for Christ, but sometimes we will blow it or things will not go as we had hoped. Finally,

3. When we blow it as a witness, the Lord graciously encourages us and gives us further opportunities to speak out for Him.

That night as Paul lay awake in bed, he was discouraged. Things had not gone well in Jerusalem. The church had not received his gift in the spirit that he had hoped. Then they got him involved in the scheme to look like a Law-keeping Jew, which led to his arrest and getting beat up. His witness before the Sanhedrin had not gone well. And the future looked uncertain and bleak. He didn't know if he ever would get to Rome, as he had hoped.

At that moment, the Lord Himself stood at Paul's side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also." What words of encouragement and hope! I don't have time to give adequate attention to these words now, but I want you to see the grace and encouragement that the Lord extends to His servants. This was the fourth time that the Lord had appeared to Paul (9:4-6 & 22:14; 22:17-18; 18:9-10). Just when Paul needed it, the Lord came and spoke these words of encouragement.

If such appearances of Christ were rare for Paul, they are extremely rare (if at all) for the rest of us. I have heard stories of persecuted prisoners who have seen a vision of the Lord, and I do not doubt such experiences. But the normal way the Lord encourages us when we feel that we've blown it is by bringing us to an encour-

aging verse of Scripture, or through an encouraging word or note from someone who may not even know that we needed it at that moment. Our gracious Lord is aware of our discouragement and He wants us to be encouraged by the promise of His presence and the assurance that He will use us again in the future.

Conclusion

Some time ago, I shared with you how I blew an opportunity to witness. It was on Thanksgiving Day, and I had just run in the Turkey Trot race at Buffalo Park. As I was catching my breath, a middle-aged man walked up and without introducing himself said, "When was the last time you had your prostate checked?" He went on to tell me that he was 53 years-old and had terminal cancer that had begun in his prostate. He was going around handing out pamphlets to every man there to get his prostate gland checked regularly. I was so startled by the encounter that I let him walk away to talk to others before I could say anything about the Lord. I stood there feeling that I had failed as a witness. I didn't even get his name, so all I could do was pray that somehow he would hear the gospel before he died.

After I shared that story in a sermon, a woman in the church told me that she knew this man and that her husband had shared the gospel with him! I was encouraged with the faithfulness of the Lord and reminded of the fact that He will work out His sovereign purpose in spite of my failures and mistakes. I want all of you to be encouraged, even if you've blown it as a witness, to get back up to the plate and swing again. Our gracious Lord will use you in spite of your mistakes if you will speak out for Him!

Discussion Questions

1. What are some ways to turn a conversation toward spiritual things?
2. What are your main fears about witnessing? How can these be overcome?
3. Why is it important for Christians to acknowledge their sins and ask forgiveness, even before unbelievers?
4. When is it right to stand up for our rights, and when should we back off?

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