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WHEN THE LORD STOOD BY PAUL IN THE NIGHT

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 115
ACTS 23:11-13

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ACTS 23:11-13 "And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome. And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy."

We have arrived at the time in our study in Acts when the Apostle Paul had become discouraged. This ought to be an encouragement to us, for we know that Paul was the greatest Christian of his day. This is a natural occupational hazard for all Christian workers--namely, discouragement. Paul was under maximum pressure and it is not difficult for us to understand why he was discouraged. He was frustrated and defeated in his mind and he was even doubting the future of his ministry. He was burdened with the thought that he had made a tragic mistake by coming to Jerusalem and he realized that he should have been far off on the western rim of the Roman Empire witnessing to the Gentiles. But Paul should have remembered the very important principle that no Christian worker can afford to spend time in self-pity and self recrimination. No matter how Paul had failed, he had no right to spend time suffering from a guilt complex. The past was over and Paul needed to forget the past and move on to future things. When any Christian takes time for "crying over spilt milk," he is out of line. Paul had rebounded, God had forgiven him, and he was back in fellowship again. Paul really had no reason for discouragement. It is not God's plan for you or any other Christian to spend time fretting about past failures. You have failed in the past--so what? The grace of God is greater than any of your failures, your sins, or your mistakes. God's grace will always be greater than any failure which may come your way.

Now Paul knew better than to let himself get into a condition like this. He had committed a legalistic blunder by coming to Jerusalem but God's grace was greater than his blunder. He knew that God would turn cursing into blessing, so for this reason Paul was out of line here by being discouraged. Now no one can speculate on what might have happened if Paul had not come to Jerusalem. It is impossible to suppose what might have happened if he had not gotten out of the geographical will of God. There is no way to speculate on this and such speculation is not important anyhow. We must always face the facts as they are, and it is a waste of time to speculate on what might have happened if there had been a different response. Such speculation just throws you back into that same old rut of confusion, and Romans 8:28 is always to be your answer to something like this. God's grace is so great he will make all things work together for your good. So don't waste your time speculating on what might have been. It accomplishes nothing. Self-blame or self-pity, or a guilt complex over past failure is a luxury no believer can afford. The irrevocable past must not have any influence on your response now. Forget it and move on. Post-mortems, crying over spilt milk, self recriminations, emotional binges and guilt complexes have no part in the Christian way of life. The Christian way of life is rebound and forget it. Confess and forget and isolate all past sins and never return to them again.

So here we find that Paul was discouraged. There never has been a Christian worker in the long history of Christianity who, at some time, or for some reason has not become discouraged. In this instance with Paul, things are going to get worse before they get better. So Paul was down, Paul was discouraged.

ACTS 23:11 "And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome." The Lord stood by him. "Ephistamai" means to stand by, to stand near. Paul was lonely and discouraged but the Lord did not forsake him. When Simon Peter was in prison and in deep trouble the Jerusalem church prayed for him. They even had an all night prayer for him. But here is a different situation and no one seemed to care. But remember, no believer is ever beyond the love and care of God. Disobedience does not remove divine love or divine protection or divine provision. So Paul's discouragement came from Paul's failure to think grace.

The Lord did not say, "Be of good cheer." The reason you are discouraged is that you can't cheer up. But these words mean vastly more than that. The Greek word here is a present, active imperative and means "Keep on being confident." Confidence is based on knowledge of Bible doctrine. "As thou hast testified concerning me" comes from "dia martureo" and does not mean "to testify" but it means "to protest." Paul came to Jerusalem and he wanted to teach them. He was emotionally attached to those Jerusalem Jews. But his ministry was to the Gentiles. They were willing to accept the ministry of grace but the Jews were not. The Jerusalem Jews rebelled against Paul's message. He wasn't invited to speak in any of their churches so all his ministry amounted to in Jerusalem was a protest. The church in Jerusalem was so legalistic and so far off course they wouldn't accept any witness from Paul concerning Christ. Within ten years from this very happening, that Jerusalem church was totally destroyed. It was the weakest and most legalistic church of all. So Paul had no witness with them, only a protest. They were on negative volition and would not hear of the grace of God from Paul. So his Jerusalem ministry was a ministry of protest.

Any pastor who has a ministry of grace will not be received by a legalistic church.

"So thou shalt bear witness in Rome." The word "bear witness" here means to communicate. Paul would communicate the gospel of grace in Rome. It is a reference to his writing of the books of Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon, which we know as the Prison Epistles. In Jerusalem, legalistic believers; in Rome, grace believers. In Jerusalem, a ministry of protest; in Rome, a ministry of the grace of God. Grace made all the difference.

God knows where we should go to witness, and if we will listen to his guidance he will lead us to the right spot. This is why a mission volunteer needs to be flexible, for God knows all the facts and he knows best about where the witness should be given. God knows where positive volition will be and he is going to get the message out there to the people who will receive it.

So the Lord stood by Paul just when he needed it most. But remember, the worst was yet to come. And it came for the purpose of testing Paul. It was God's way of preparing Paul for the days ahead.

So in substance this is what the Lord said to Paul--"Paul, you wanted to have a communication ministry in Jerusalem, but you had only a protest ministry. But keep on being confident Paul, for I am going to see to it that you have a communication ministry in Rome."

Please remember this--Paul never forgot that visit he had with the Lord that night in Jerusalem. Paul would go for a long time on the inner strength he gathered from that visit with Jesus.

You see, Paul was ready to give the message we find in Ephesians and Colossians and Philippians right there in Jerusalem, but he didn't get the chance. But they were too stuffed with religion and legalism to be able to understand grace preaching like that. Paul would have to wait until he got to Rome to communicate that message. Later on the Book of Hebrews would be written for these legalistic Jews in Jerusalem. Hebrews would present the believer as a believer priest, while Ephesians would present the believer as an ambassador for Christ. The Jerusalem church just couldn't take Paul's message. It was too demanding, too great, and it was grace-oriented. The Book of Hebrews pointed the Jews to the truth that they ought to stay out of the temple and go to the word of God for guidance. So remember this great truth--God always has the right man for the right place at the right time. For Jerusalem Paul was the wrong man in the wrong place in the wrong time.

This is why the Lord appeared to Paul. He wanted to assure Paul that he had not deserted him just because he had made a mistake by coming to Jerusalem. During that night in the Roman barracks, Paul got enough of a positive charge from Christ to last him through months and years of imprisonment and privation. In years to come Paul would think back on that lonely night when Christ stood by him and lifted his spirits and reinforced his mind for the twelve years that lay ahead for him.

The Assassination Plot--Verses 12 and 13

ACTS 23:12 "And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul." Here we see it is going to get worse before it gets better. The legalistic, religious Jews are here seen taking a vow. Everything is real tense in Jerusalem and these fanatical, legalistic Jews know nothing better than to take a vow.

"When it became day" the Greek says, and this indicates that the Lord visited with Paul quite a long time through the night.

Then it says, "Certain Jews." Let us look at seven points on this phrase "Certain Jews."

1. These Jews were religious unbelievers and like all religious people they were eager to prove themselves.

2. Paul was isolated and lonely but now encouraged. The visit with Christ had encouraged him.
Application--A time may come to some of us when we will be imprisoned, lonely, discouraged. We will have no Bible and no one to cheer. What will we do then? All you will have will be the truth of Scripture you will have in your mind. Your ability to cope with the situation will be your knowledge of Bible truth.
3. The night was passed without any word from the Jerusalem church. They were not praying for Paul and they did not contact him.
4. Paul's status--He had to stand on his own two feet without any human help.
5. Paul experienced nothing but hostility and pressure. But a visit from Christ and the truth of doctrine Paul had in his mind carried him through.
6. Paul's greatest opposition came from religion.
7. The church in Jerusalem was legalistic and therefore gave no help. At that moment the Jerusalem church was laying the foundation for their own destruction.

These Jews came together in a conspiracy. The word is "Anathematizo" and means to vow again and again and again. They said again and again "God strike me dead if I don't kill Paul by sundown." They went on a hunger strike and said they would neither eat nor drink until they had murdered Paul. Well, the irony of that is this--Paul lived for twelve years after that night, so I suppose they must have been rather thin from their hunger strike for all that time.

ACTS 23:13 "And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy." So forty of these Jews took a vow to kill Paul. But from what happened later we know they had to break their vow. I expect some of them almost starved before they finally gave in and ate again. They were too stupid to give up even when they came to realize God had delivered Paul out of their hands.

Now get this principle--You don't move forward by taking vows and making religious decisions. You move forward by learning Bible doctrine. These assassins made stupid vows and worthless decisions and God overruled them and utterly defeated them. Be sure when you make a decision you make it on the basis of truth and Bible doctrine. In our next study we will see how these forty dedicated themselves to a false and worthless cause.