

ACTS | Courage | Story 33

Acts 21:34-39; 22:1-22

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Introduction

Your CHARACTER will never grow unless it's CONFRONTED.

Your DETERMINATION will never grow unless it's DISPUTED.

Your FAITH will never grow unless it's STRETCHED.

Your COURAGE will never grow unless it's CHALLENGED.

At some point in your life, you're going to face challenge, uncertainty, obstacles, and opposition. It's in these moments that our character, our resolve, our faith, our courage are put to the fire, to the test.

How do you gain the resolve to do the right thing, no matter how big or small the issue, no matter how public or private? **How do you gain the courage to do the right thing**, regardless of the consequences? **What gives someone the courage to endure**, to stand firm when everything is on the line?

From Acts 21 through the end of the book is essentially one hostile encounter, one hostile audience, one life-threatening situation after another for the Apostle Paul. His friends begged him not to go back to Jerusalem—they knew what awaited him there.

There are a few themes in this last section of the book: one is that **God can bring tremendous good out of horrendous evil**. He can turn what Satan meant for evil in our life, and use it not only for our good, but for the good of those around us.

In **today's** passage Paul displays incredible courage in the face of overwhelming circumstances. It gives us some profound insights on how we can find the courage to endure, to stand firm, to walk through the fires of life.

BACKGROUND: Paul had traveled the first century world teaching that Jesus Christ, as the fulfillment of the law, actually paved the way for Gentiles, non-Jews, to receive salvation and not be required to keep the Mosaic Law. Simultaneously, Paul was telling the Jews, that the Mosaic law, the sacrificial laws, the ceremonial and dietary laws, didn't make them clean before God—that Jesus fulfilled the law, and only by trusting in His completed work could they be made clean before God. When He got back to Jerusalem, word had gotten around about what Paul was teaching, and a full-blown riot had broken out. The mob began to beat Paul severely.

The whole city was in an uproar, and while they were beating Paul, a Roman military commander brought his troops to the riot, put Paul in chains, and then tried to figure out what was going on.

Acts 21:34-36

Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. ³⁵ And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶ for the mob of the people followed, crying out, “Away with him!”

This situation was so bad, and the mob was so violent that the soldiers had to lift Paul up and carry him away from the crowd so he wouldn’t be beaten to death.

Acts 21:37-39

As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, “May I say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek? ³⁸ Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?” ³⁹ Paul replied, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia...”

- Paul speaks to the Roman tribune in Greek
- The Commander looks at the Paul and says, “Wait... you know Greek? So, you’re not the leader of those 4,000 Assassins?”
- Paul then pleads with the tribune to allow him to speak to the mob
- A great hush comes over the crowd, as Paul is about to address them

Acts 22:1, 3-5

“Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.” ³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

- Paul was one of the few people in the world that had the unique ability to say, “*I know what you’re doing, and I know why you’re doing it! You’re zealous for God! Just as I was when I was persecuting Christians...*”
- And then Paul says, “*But it all changed for me... Jesus revealed Himself to me on the road to Damascus, the light was so bright I was blinded... and Jesus sent me to Ananias, a devout and well-respected Jew who help me see again, lead me to call on the name of Jesus, and baptized me...*”

Acts 22:16

‘Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

- Now, to the Jews, they believe there’s no reason for them to be baptized because they’re made clean through sacrifice and obeying the cleansing and ceremonial laws. But when a gentile converted to Judaism, they had to be “cleansed” through baptism, because the gentiles were viewed as “dirty, unclean, unholy dogs.”
- So, Paul, in describing his own conversion, is saying there’s not a single Jew present in this mob that is clean before God
- Paul is saying, “You Pharisees, you religious zealots, you are just as unclean, just as defiled, just as lost—as the dirtiest pagan!

Then Paul described His commission from God, to go and preach to the gentiles! To welcome them into God’s family. But that wasn’t what was controversial. What was controversial was that Paul was saying

that Jews and the gentiles, were *both equally unclean*, and that through the Messiah, and *without the law of Moses*, they held equal standing before God. That it was based, not on obedience and adherence to the law—but through trust in Christ. These people LOST THEIR MINDS!

Acts 22:22

Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

- He had just presented the gospel.
- You are every bit as lost, but when you call on his name, you are completely loved and completely accepted.
- Their reaction tells us that the good news isn’t good news to everyone.

1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-23

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

- If something is going to keep someone from following Jesus—I’d rather it be that they consider the gospel to be foolishness—not something I’m doing or failing to do to keep them from Jesus.
 - **Matthew 18:7**
7 “Woe to the world because of *its* stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to the person through whom the stumbling block comes! (NASB)

**So, the gospel isn’t good news to everyone—
but Paul knew that it was his job preach the gospel anyway.**

We’re tempted to think that we don’t need courage like this in our culture today.

But what about the courage to stand up when it matters?

- the courage to speak up when it counts
- the courage to do the right thing when no one is watching
- the courage to be willing to receive less than you’re apparently due
- the courage to relinquish your rights for the sake of the gospel
- the courage to do right regardless of the consequences

In the Old Testament was a pagan city called Babylon, and God’s people were exiled there. God instructed them to live IN the culture, but NOT to conform TO the culture. Love the people, work for the welfare of all people in Babylon—but NOT to adopt their beliefs, their values.

ILLUSTRATION: Today, if you’re a follower of Jesus and you’re single, you are surrounded by a culture in America and in media that tells you that “*sex outside of marriage is a great thing. It’s healthy, natural, fun.*”

- But if you’re a Christian, scripture is explicit on this issue... sex, outside of marriage is not how we were designed to live. It wreaks havoc on your soul, it causes severe damage to any relationship because God designed all the blessings of the relationship to be accompanied by your commitment. If you want all the benefits without the commitment, that relationship is not about blessing the other person, but about using that person in order to serve yourself.

In today's culture, most people don't see it that way. They would say, this belief is outdated, archaic, primitive.

- And, if you're a Christian and you say, "What's the big deal? It's fine to have sex outside of marriage." And you compromise on what is explicit in scripture... you're succumbing to the pressure. You're bowing to the image. You're giving in.

Scripture is rife with examples like this, that Christians are pressured to compromise on—sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, abortion, on how we're to treat foreigners and refugees, the poor, widows and orphans. On every front, God is absolutely clear through His word on how we are to live in this kind of world. Yet many of us are on the verge of compromising our faith in one way or another because of the pressure of our culture, or subcultures.

What is so terrifying and convicting for us in the west, we're facing this pressure all the time. If you don't feel like you're under pressure, you know what that means? It means you've already compromised. And if that's you—if you've compromised your faith under the pressure of culture—what it tells you is that...

- *you'd rather live for the approval of men than the applause of heaven*
- *you'd rather please the people around you than please God*
- *you'd rather be relevant than obedient*
- *you'd rather compromise your convictions now, than face the ridicule, and hardship that comes with humbly, gently, lovingly but firmly holding to biblical Christianity*

But how do you live with a courage like Paul had?

How do you live with courage to stand firm in the storms and pressures of life?

I want you to see something in the very beginning of this passage that is seemingly so insignificant! It's easy to miss...

Acts 22:1

"Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."

Acts 6:12-7:2

...they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.⁷ And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"² And Stephen said: [Pause, then add] **"Brothers and fathers,** hear me."

This is the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Who was there overseeing, and approving of Stephen's martyrdom? Paul, a Pharisee, who trying to destroy every trace of Christianity from the earth.

And all these years later, Paul is in a situation where his own life is in the balance—this may be the last opportunity he ever has to preach the gospel—he begins his message with the same exact phrase that Stephen did...

What Stephen did in those few moments before his death left such an indelible mark on Paul—that the great missionary, church planter, pioneer, the Apostle Paul followed in Stephen's footsteps in a moment where he knew his end could be near.

What you do in moments where courage is required... even in the smallest, seemingly most insignificant moments... your stepping in, and standing up... matters. You may never know the impact you leave on someone's life. You may never have any idea what impact you've made until years later... and maybe it's not until the other side of the veil.

- **Old Testament Example:** Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were about to be thrown into the furnace by Nebuchadnezzar if they don't bow to the golden image. He looked at them and says, "What god has the power to deliver you out of my hands?"
- **Daniel 3:16-18**
Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

Look how incredible that is! Not just "*Our God is able..., but He WILL save us! And not only that... even if God chooses not to save us... we still are not going to bow to the image!*"

How do you get that kind of courage?

This is so powerful—each of these people—Paul, Stephen, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—look at what they're saying. **These are men of principle—and what they're each telling their audience is this:** "You serve your gods because of what they give to you. You love your gods because of what you believe they can do for you. But we serve God not for what we get out of Him, but simply because we get Him! We trust God, not for selfish gain, but because He is worthy and deserving of our trust, no matter what we receive or don't receive. We love God for Himself! So do to us what you will! Do your worst! Have at it!"

Some are living under a contract that God never signed. So, when God doesn't give us what we want, and we've served him for so long, we get disillusioned, we're angry, we abandon our faith. We're holding God to terms that He never agreed to! In that case, you don't trust God—you trust in whatever your agenda is—whatever outcome you want to see—and whenever God doesn't come through—you bail. But your trust was never in God in the first place.

These men of faith trusted God and were loyal to Him no matter the outcome—because they understood this truth:

**God can rescue you from death, but ultimately,
God is going to recue you through death.**

Each of these men understood that before they were thrown into the fire... they had already won! Either way, whether they lived or died, whether they were set free or stoned to death, either way—at the end of the journey was an absolute certain victory.

My favorite poem of all time is by a 17th century Anglican priest, George Herbert.
He wrote this dialogue between the Christian and Death itself—it's called the "Dialogue Anthem."

*Alas, poor Death! Where is thy glory?
Where is thy famous force, thy ancient sting?*

Alas, poor mortal, void of story!
Go spell and read how I have killed thy King.

*Poor Death! And who was hurt thereby?
Thy curse being laid on Him makes thee accursed.*

Let losers talk, yet thou shalt die;
These arms shall crush thee.

*Spare not, do thy worst.
I shall be one day better than before;
Thou so much worse, that thou shalt be no more.¹*

~George Herbert, Dialogue Anthem

*"Death used to be an executioner,
but the gospel has made him just a gardener."²*

~George Herbert

**Head held high,
heart bowed low,
eyes on Christ,
here we go.**

~ Rob Rogers

Discussion Questions

1. What gives someone the courage to endure, to stand, when everything is on the line?
2. How was Paul's speech influenced by his having been present at Stephen's death?
3. What is your understanding of how/why the gospel may not be good news to everyone, and what is your responsibility in that situation?
4. What kind of courage do we need to have in today's culture?
5. How do you learn to trust God in any situation, no matter what the outcome is?

¹ George Herbert. *The Complete English Poems* (Penguin UK, Oct 7, 2004).

² Timothy Keller. *On Death* (Penguin, Mar 3, 2020) p. 72.

NOTES