

Lesson 6 | July 9, 2023

Testifying to the Gospel

Study Text: Acts 21:26 through 22:29

Central Truth: It is not only the Church's responsibility but every Christian's responsibility to testify about Christ to the lost.

Key Verse: Reference

For thou [Paul] shalt be his [Jesus Christ's] witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard (KJV).

For you [Paul] are to be his [Jesus Christ's] witness, telling everyone what you have seen and heard (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will recount how God brought Paul from persecuting Christians to testifying powerfully for Christ.
- Students will realize the need for commitment to Christ despite the dangers it can bring.
- Students will tell others their testimony of Christ, no matter what response it may bring from listeners.

Introducing the Study

Say: In court, witnesses swear to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” This serves as a deterrent against false testimony, which can lead to unjust punishments like fines, imprisonment, or even the death penalty.

Opening Activity—Lies Bring Pain

Ask. Outside of a court of law, what effect can lying about someone have on family relationships? Relationships with friends and neighbors? Relationships at work? (Allow time for discussion.) People who have been on the receiving end of an attack on their character or behavior find plenty of company in the Bible. Those following God's plan—whether a patriarch, a prophet, or even the Savior—regularly find themselves suffering bitter accusations from those opposed to God's plan.

Say: God comforts and strengthens His people in their time of trouble. Further, God often turns persecution into another opportunity for His people to extend the message of Christ in the midst of their suffering. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus said, “Do you remember what I told you? ‘A slave is not greater than the master.’ Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you” (John 15:20, NLT). His followers discovered the truth of His words in the days and years following His death, resurrection, and return to heaven. For many, that persecution took the form of verbal accusation. For some, it meant death. In today's passage, Paul was accused of disrespect for the law of Moses and its recipients, the Jews.

Part 1—Persecuted for Teaching the Faith Falsely Accused

Acts 21:26–29

Say: In Jerusalem, Paul met with the leaders of the Church—Jewish Christians—who had agreed that Gentile converts did not need to follow the entire Jewish law (Acts 21:20–25). However, they wanted to show that Paul was not teaching Jewish Christians to abandon the Law, so they encouraged him to support several men who apparently had taken a Nazirite vow (see Numbers 6:1–21). Paul likely paid for the sacrificial animals and gave notice to the priests of the date when the offerings would be made (Acts 21:26). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jews from the province of Asia were also in the temple to worship (verse 27). Seeing Paul, they stirred up the crowd and took hold of him. Their cry of “This is the man” indicates they had discussed Paul with the Jews of Jerusalem (verse 28, NLT). They brought several accusations against Paul: Wherever he went, he maligned his own people, the Jews; he taught against the Mosaic law; and he taught against the temple, where most of the ceremonies prescribed in the Law were performed. Finally, they claimed that Paul brought Greeks into the holy place of the temple. Gentiles could worship in the outer court but were forbidden from coming any further. The chamber in which the Nazirites fulfilled their requirements was beyond the Gentile court. The Jews of Asia recognized Trophimus, an Ephesian Gentile, whom they had seen earlier that day with Paul, and falsely accused Paul of bringing him further than the Gentile court (verse 29; see Acts 20:4).

Discuss

? Was there any basis for the charges brought against Paul? Explain.

? Why do you suppose the crowd was so quick to turn against him?

Arrested and Questioned

Acts 21:30–36

Say: The whole city heard the accusations of Paul’s opponents, and a riot broke out (Acts 21:30). Paul was dragged from the temple so the rioters could not pollute the temple by shedding his blood there. The Levite gatekeepers shut the gates after he was removed. Without any trial, the rioters beat Paul, fully intending to kill him (verse 31). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Resource Packet Item 1: Persecution Advances the Gospel

Distribute the information sheet and have volunteers read the verses. Discuss the points, and additional ways that class members identify that persecution advances the gospel.

Help came from the commander of the Roman regiment at Jerusalem, who heard about the uproar (verses 31–32). Such unrest had to be stopped to prevent sedition charges. But this was more than the action of an occupying power; God protected Paul so his witness of Christ could reach all the way to Rome (Acts 28:30–31; see Romans 1:16).

Believing him guilty, the commander arrested Paul and ordered him bound to show the crowd that he would not escape justice (Acts 21:33). He asked the crowd about Paul's identity and actions but learned nothing in the loud and confusing exchange (verse 34). At this point Paul was taken to the citadel of Antonia built by Herod the Great in honor of Mark Antony. Part of it was used as soldiers' barracks.

Stairs led from the temple area to the tower where soldiers were stationed (verse 35). To avoid further harm to Paul, the soldiers lifted him to their shoulders. By shouting "Away with him," the crowd left no doubt that they wanted him to die (verse 36, KJV; see 22:22; Luke 23:18, KJV).

Discuss

? Read 1 Timothy 2:1–4. Why should we pray for our leaders, whether or not they are believers?

? Read Philippians 3:10–11. Describe Paul's twofold desire to know Jesus Christ.

Part 2—Testifying of God before Others

Life before Christ

Acts 21:37 through 22:5

Say: The commander was surprised to find that Paul knew Greek (Acts 21:37). After the fall of the Grecian Empire, Greek was well-known among all classes of Romans and was commonly used in Asia and Egypt. The commander asked Paul if he was an Egyptian who was the leader of a rebellion along with four thousand "murderers" (verse 38, KJV) or "assassins" (NLT). The historian Josephus told of an Egyptian false prophet who led a group of thousands to the Mount of Olives and then escaped, although hundreds of his followers were killed by Rome. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul identified himself to the commander as a Jew and a citizen of Tarsus in Cilicia, a city known for its learning and commerce (verse 39). Receiving permission to address the crowd, he spoke in "the Hebrew tongue" (verse 40, KJV) or Aramaic.

Paul directed his words to his fellow Jews, calling them "men, brethren, and fathers" as Stephen had done (Acts 22:1–2, KJV; see 7:2). He was eager to declare he was innocent of the charges they had brought against him (see 21:28).

Paul established his Jewish identity, including his education in Jerusalem by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3, see 5:34). Trained in the strictest form of Judaism, he was “zealous toward God” as his listeners were (22:3, KJV). This zeal had displayed itself in Paul’s actions toward the followers of Christ, resulting in death for some (verse 4, NLT). Although there is no record of Paul himself executing anyone, he was in agreement with Stephen’s death and cast his vote to condemn other Christians to death (Acts 8:1; 26:10). The Jewish authorities in Jerusalem would have witnessed Paul’s actions in his former life (Acts 22:5). Paul presented himself as a strict Jew who had severely opposed “the Way” (NLT) prior to his journey to Damascus.

Discuss

? How did the wide use of the Greek language pave the way for communicating the gospel?

? Think about your life before you met Christ. How can those events and experiences help you reach people for Him right now?

Paul Meets Christ

Acts 22:6–13

Say: Paul testified that a great light shone around him as he traveled toward Damascus (Acts 22:6). The fact it happened at noon, when the sun was already at its highest, showed the brilliance of this supernatural event. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Speaking of himself, Jesus said, “Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone it falls on” (Matthew 21:44, NLT). Jesus appeared in Paul’s path and allowed Paul to be broken upon Him—brought to a place of humility. When asked, “Why are you persecuting me?” Paul discovered it was Jesus, whose followers he sought to arrest and punish, who had interrupted his journey (Acts 22:7–9, NLT). He would also discover that his teacher, Gamaliel, had been correct: If the Christian movement was from God, its opponents would find themselves fighting against Him! (Acts 5:38–39).

This kind of encounter with Christ calls for a decision. Even before Jesus spoke further, Paul asked to hear the Lord’s direction for his life (22:10). Jesus’ direction would come through a disciple in Damascus. Now blind, Paul was led into the city where he had planned to apprehend Christians (verse 11).

We can find other testimonies of dramatic conversions such as Paul’s. Repentance and a new way of life will always mark a true conversion. Modern-day examples of this radical change include author C. S. Lewis and other well-known writers and ministers. Each local church is a storehouse for the testimonies of those who have had dramatic conversions.

Resource Packet Item 2: What Have You Been Appointed to Do?

Hand out the worksheet and have volunteers read verses following the questions. Discuss each point and allow class members to share their experiences with God's vocational guidance.

Paul had testified to the Jews of Jerusalem about his strict Jewish training and opposition to the Christian way. A supernatural encounter with Christ changed his direction, but Paul was helped in his newfound faith by a devoted Jew named Ananias (verse 12). Ananias had accepted the truth of Jesus Christ and was His instrument to bring healing to a blinded Paul (verse 13). We can also be instrumental in helping new believers in our local church as we watch for opportunities to support and encourage them.

Discuss

? Why do you suppose Christ met Paul in such a dramatic fashion compared to the original twelve apostles?

? How should the fact that each believer is part of the body of Christ affect your relationship with other Christians?

? What part may other believers play in bringing God's guidance to you?

Part 3—Opposition to Paul's Testimony Called to the Gentiles

Acts 22:14–21

Say: Ananias not only brought healing to Paul; he also told Paul about God's purpose for his life (Acts 22:14). Paul was chosen to know the will of God, that is, His plan to save people and bring them into right relationship with Him. Paul was also chosen to see the "Righteous One," the resurrected Christ, which was one of the qualifications for apostleship (verse 14, NLT; see 1 Corinthians 9:1). And he was chosen to hear the voice of Christ as clearly as His disciples had. These experiences prepared Paul to witness far and wide (Acts 22:15). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Ananias urged Paul to follow his calling immediately, starting with a declaration of faith through water baptism (verse 16). Paul was told to call upon the name of the Lord, just as Peter's audience was urged on the Day of Pentecost (2:21).

After spending three years in Arabia and Damascus, Paul returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple (Galatians 1:17–18; Acts 22:17). In a trance, Paul saw a vision of Christ, who told him to leave the city since its inhabitants would not receive his witness (verse 18).

Resource Packet Item 3: God Grants Visions

Hand out the worksheet and divide the class into groups, giving each group a passage or two to examine. Then have each group share what God accomplished through granting these visions in Acts.

Paul argued that his fellow Jews in Jerusalem would remember his reputation as a persecutor and see the profound changes in his life (verses 19–20). Instead, Jesus repeated His command and specified Paul’s target audience: “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!” (verse 21, NLT).

Paul was uniquely qualified to take the gospel to the Gentiles. He had been thoroughly trained under Gamaliel, receiving a classical education in Tarsus. He was able to argue points of Jewish law (see Romans 4, 9–11) and illustrate it from Greek literature. Because Paul was also trained as a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5), he was allowed access to synagogues everywhere. In addition, he held the privileges of Roman citizenship, which opened doors for him throughout the Roman world.

Discuss

? Read John 1:14 and 1 John 1:1–4. In what ways does a dynamic, living relationship with Christ enable us to be powerful witnesses for Him?

? Why do you suppose, in God’s plan, Paul was not one of the original twelve apostles but was called later?

Paul, the Roman Citizen

Acts 22:22–29

Say: The crowd listened intently to Paul, until he claimed a divine calling to preach his message to the Gentiles (Acts 22:22–23). Even if they did not believe or accept Paul’s message themselves, they did not want God’s grace to be extended to Gentiles. They reflected the same attitude as those who bitterly opposed Christ when He suggested opening the same door of faith to non-Jews (Luke 4:22–30; see Mark 7:24–30). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Roman commander, believing Paul was guilty because of the cries of the mob, ordered him to be flogged, a common procedure under Roman administration (Acts 22:24). However, it was unlawful to bind and scourge a Roman citizen without a trial. When Paul drew attention to his citizenship, the centurion spoke to his commander (verses 25–26). It was the highest offense to falsely claim to be a Roman citizen, and it was unlikely a prisoner would lie in this manner.

The commander knew the seriousness of scourging a Roman citizen; he could be removed from his command position and even suffer physical punishment. Confirming Paul was a citizen, the commander told him about his own citizenship; he appears to have been a foreigner who had become a Roman citizen by paying a sizable amount of money (verses 27–28). Paul responds that he was born a citizen.

Paul's citizenship kept him from being flogged and the penalty of Roman law did not fall upon his interrogators (verse 29).

Discuss

? Why do you suppose Paul's listeners opposed others receiving a grace that they had rejected themselves?

? Read Galatians 2:6–10. How did Paul's calling differ from Peter's?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: False accusations of wrongdoing can bring expensive or life-altering penalties; they can also smear one's reputation in the public eye, even when a verdict of "not guilty" is returned. The apostle Paul withstood a collection of denunciations that were both false and intensely personal, being accused of speech against the law, the temple, and his own people, the Jews. Yet Paul wanted to clear his name only for the gospel's sake. He serves as an example for believers who are spoken against—and even taken to court—for their commitment to the message of Christ. Christians falsely charged with wrongdoing can confidently ask God to bring the truth to light, not only the truth of their innocence, but the truth of His work of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

■ Look for opportunities to support believers who are suffering for their commitment to Jesus

Christ, both in your community and around the world.

■ Pray that God would help you respond like Paul and Jesus when unbelievers oppose you with unjust actions and words.

■ Examine your own words about others. Are you always truthful, forgiving, loving, and wise?

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Laws about a Witness's Testimony.

Deuteronomy 19:15–21

Tuesday:

Job's Plea for God's Witness.

Job 16:18–22

Wednesday:

Nature and Scripture Testify of God.

Psalms 19:1–11

Thursday:

Witnesses of Jesus.

John 5:31–37

Friday:

Promise to Empower Witnesses.

Acts 1:4–11

Saturday:

Two Witnesses.

Revelation 11:1–13