

“AND SO IT BEGINS!”

John 15:18-16:4a, Acts 22:22-29, Acts 22:30-23:11

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“We all have tough days. Some are worse than others. Like the one the hard-hat employee reported on his accident form when he tried to be helpful: (He says)

“When I got to the building I found that the hurricane had knocked off some bricks around the top. So I rigged up a beam with a pulley at the top of the building and hoisted up a couple barrels full of bricks. When I had fixed the damaged area, there were a lot of bricks left over. Then I went to the bottom and began releasing the line. Unfortunately, the barrel of bricks was much heavier than I was - and before I knew what was happening the barrel started coming down, jerking me up.

“I decided to hang on since I was too far off the ground by then to jump, and halfway up I met the barrel of bricks coming down fast. I received a hard blow on my shoulder. I then continued to the top, banging my head against the beam and getting my fingers pinched and jammed in the pulley. When the barrel hit the ground hard, it burst the bottom, allowing the bricks to spill out.

“I was now heavier than the barrel. So I started down again a high speed. Halfway down I met the barrel coming up fast and received sever injuries to my shins. When I hit the ground, I landed on the pile of spilled bricks, getting several painful cuts and deep bruises. At this point I must have lost my presence of mind, because I let go of my grip on the line. The barrel came down fast - giving me another blow on my head and putting me in the hospital.

“I respectfully request sick leave.”¹ There are some days that it just doesn’t pay to get up. I can only imagine the situation this man endured. It was one OSHA nightmare.

But each one of us must face our own difficult days in this life here on the earth. It may

¹ (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998] pg. 21-22)

not be a bricklayer having it out with a barrel of bricks, but we all face our struggles and problems that make us question our surroundings. And there are certainly days that we might be led to question, “What next?”

Well, throughout Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles, he faced days that were laced with troubles and trials. Even as he began to make his way back to Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit had indicated to him that he would face great trials for the Lord Jesus. The seventh day at the Temple in Jerusalem proved to be a day that just kept on going, one trial after another. Even after delivering his testimony to the Jews in the Temple mount, it just seemed to go on and on. It could easily have left Paul asking for sick leave. But there was much yet to be done for the Lord, and that we’ll see in the upcoming weeks.

Now, the riot that had stopped in order to hear him give his testimony, began right up again as Paul told the people that he had been called by the Lord to go to the Gentiles with the Good News of God’s fulfilling the prophecies of the promised Messiah in Jesus Christ. They immediately took offense to that, believing that the Messiah as a prophecy that was meant only for the Jews. But, since the Jews would not hear about Jesus, Paul had been sent to those outside the Jewish tradition to share what God had done to provide His Messiah for all people to be saved from their sins, as they believed upon Him and received Him into their hearts. But that infuriated the Jews on the Temple Mount, and the riot reignited with explosive force.

So, as you heard in our first lesson for today from the Book of Acts (22:22-29), the commander of the Roman cohort was insistent upon learning what the riot was about. His first thought was that he would get it out of Paul by flogging him and interrogating him. But there was a problem - Paul was a Roman citizen, and that status gave him special privileges among the people. It protected him from instant “executions of justice” by the Roman soldiers and gave

him immunity from interrogations. So the commander had to change tactics to get at the whole truth. I invite you to listen to the next part of the account of those crazy few days. This is Acts 22:30-23:11. (READ Acts 22:30-23:11)

The “commander clearly had to proceed carefully. He could not discharge his prisoner for fear of further riots; on the other hand, he could not inflict a warning punishment himself because of Paul’s status as a Roman citizen. His only course was to try to get the Jews to present their grievance against Paul in an intelligible form.”² But that proved to be just as chaotic.

As the Sanhedrin was assembled, Paul was put before them so that things could be presented calmly. But as Paul stated, “*My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day*” (23:1), suddenly the chief priest ordered that he be struck on the mouth. WHY? “For speaking out of turn? For not using a sufficiently respectful form of address? For making a statement he regarded as untrue? And why had Paul ‘*not realized that he was the High Priest*’ (for so far as we know it was always the High Priest who presided)? (Was it) “because Paul was short-sighted” (and couldn’t see clearly the man who had made the command to strike him)? “Or because he thought the man’s conduct unworthy of his high office? These questions can be answered only by guesswork; possibly Luke had to construct the scene out of scanty information. But he was able to make two points: **first**, the court proceeded illegally in allowing the prisoner to be struck before the verdict (Leviticus 19:15 - “*You shall do no injustice in judgement*”); **secondly**, Paul’s retaliation was in the manner of a prophet: ‘*God will strike you.*’ In fact, Ananias was murdered a few years later. Luke may have known this and seen Paul’s speech as an inspired prophecy; if so, it became even more impressive if Paul uttered it, as it were, blindfold, without realizing who it was he was speaking to - this is a possible explanation of the episode. At the same time, Paul’s curious unawareness was also his defense against what

² (A.E. Harvey, *Companion to the New Testament*, [Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1979] pg. 487)

he recognized to be a clear infringement of the Law (Exodus 22:28), ‘*You must not abuse the ruler of your people*’. Both in Paul’s opening statement, and despite the formal offence involved in prophesying the priest’s death, Luke was anxious to show that Paul was correct by the Jewish law, and was a man with a perfectly clear conscience.”³

This is so true for us even today. We face situations where we are confronted with our actions. Even if we are right, there are some who will view us as being wrong, no matter how right we might be. And this is echoed in Jesus’ statement made to His disciples in John 15 and 16, “*They will treat you this way because of My Name, for they do not know the One who sent Me ... in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or Me*” (15:21, 16:2-3). Because we are followers of Jesus, we can come to expect abuse, wrongdoing, and injustice against us. And sadly, it is happening all too often right in the life of the Church today. But we are to anticipate this kind of treatment and continue to live for Jesus, nonetheless.

But sadly that wasn’t the end of it. Paul recognized the different beliefs between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, and he played that out to his advantage. The Sadducees were strict letter-of-the-law folks who were focused only on the here and now. The Pharisees, by contrast, were more connected to the things of God, and saw God’s intercession into humanity through angels and spirits, and claimed that since God is Spirit, we have hope for resurrection from the dead through our own spiritual being as we claim God’s presence in our lives.

So the division between the two groups did not accomplish the purpose of the meeting called by the commander of the Roman cohort, but it did cause him to recognize the need for Paul’s protection. It also made him aware that this was a much greater situation than what he was able to settle and that it needed to go before higher magistrates.

³ (A.E. Harvey, *Companion to the New Testament*, [Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1979] pg. 488)

So, rescuing Paul once more from the fury of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the commander brought him back into the barracks. Paul was no longer a prisoner, but he was there with the Roman cohort for protective custody. I can only imagine the soldiers wondering who in the world this man was who, not only created chaos in the Temple mount on a festival day, but also created havoc among the Jewish leadership. This would have given Paul the opportunity to talk with them, if they were interested, and share with them what he had been doing and introducing them to the Lord Jesus Christ.

This whole event reminds me of the account of “a shipwrecked man (who) managed to reach an uninhabited island. There, to protect himself against the elements and to safeguard the few possessions he had salvaged, he painstakingly built a little hut from which he constantly and prayerfully scanned the horizon for the approach of a ship. Returning one evening after a search for food, he was terrified to find the hut completely enveloped in flames. Yet by divine mercy this hard affliction was changed into a mighty advantage. Early the following morning he awoke to find a ship anchored off the island. When the captain stepped ashore, he explained, ‘We saw your smoke signal and came.’ Everything the marooned man owned had to be destroyed before he could be rescued.”⁴

It seems that this is true for each one of us, too. Many times we have to get so low that all we can do is to look up. And when we look up, we see that Jesus is right there by our side, extending His hand to us with the offer to lead us into a new direction so that we might not only prosper, but fulfill God’s will for our lives. Sometimes the very trials and struggles we think are about to crush us, actually bring about a completely different result as we trust in the Lord and allow His plan to work through us at that moment of time.

⁴ (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, pg. 23)

The bricklayer in the opening account had time on his hands to consider the blessings of God that kept him safe from death at the work site. Because he came face to face with his injuries and was able to consider all that COULD have happened, my hope is that he was able to turn to the Lord with a renewed strength, knowing that God loved him enough to protect him from even more severe injury.

And that is the reason for many of our own trials and struggles. When we get so involved in the ways and activities of life here in our world that only the Lord can work in it, then, when trials do come to us, we have the chance to ponder those difficulties, and then to watch and praise God for the things He has done in the midst of those trials and struggles.

When we look at Paul's situation, who knows how many of the soldiers had the chance to consider the resurrection from the dead because Paul talked to them about it? Who knows how many had the chance to ponder things beyond this life as they interacted with Him? Who knows how many of the Jews that Paul addressed had the chance to reconsider the promises of the Lord in giving a Messiah who would save the whole world? We do not know the fullness of work that was done by the Lord through this riot in the Temple that day, or of the situation Paul had with the Sanhedrin the next day.

And we don't know what will come about in the middle of our own struggles and trials when we put our hope and trust in Jesus to receive honor and glory through our being His faithful witnesses. Hardships can bring new life. Let me give you an example from nature of what I'm talking about. Jesus used a lot of naturally occurring examples in His teaching to explain to the people what He was saying, so let me do the same thing for a moment.

"An unusual evergreen tree is the lodgepole pine that is seen in great numbers in Yellowstone Park. The cones of this pine may hang on the tree for years and years, and even

when they fall, they do not open. These cones can only be opened when they come in contact with intense heat. But God has a reason for planning them this way. When a forest fire rages throughout parks and forests, all the trees are destroyed. At the same time, however, the heat of the fire opens the cones of the lodgepole pine and these pines are often the first trees to grow in an area that has been burned by fire.”⁵ Through the intensity of the heat of the forest fires, the cones open up to allow the seeds within to begin to germinate and take root in the barren soil, initiating a brand new forest.

So, too, our struggles and trials may become so intense in our lives that the heat of those difficulties opens up new avenues for us to see new growth possibilities around us. The seeds of new life through the work of the Holy Spirit are released to begin to move us into new directions and interact with new people. Those new interactions create opportunities for ministry to happen by which God is glorified and many more people are impacted for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Are you finding yourself surrounded by adversaries bringing difficulties and hardships? Are you facing life struggles that have taken you to your knees? Are you to the point of asking for sick leave, because you’ve been beaten up so badly? There is hope in trusting Jesus as your Savior and Lord, for He will continue to guide and direct you no matter what you have to face. Don’t give up living for Jesus. He’ll be there to direct your paths every day.

Let me close today with the words of Arthur Bennett in his poem, *Valley of Vision*.

“Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
Thou has brought me to the valley of vision,
where I live in the depths but see Thee in the heights;
hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold Thy glory.
Let me learn by paradox - that the way down is the way up,

⁵ (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, pg. 22)

that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart,
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
that to give is to receive,
that the valley is the place of vision.

Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from the deepest wells,

And the deeper the wells the brighter Thy stars shine;

Let me find Thy light in my darkness,

Thy life in my death,

Thy joy in my sorrow,

Thy grace I my sin,

Thy riches in my poverty,

Thy glory in my valley.”⁶

Let's pray. Father, we thank You for the lives that we have here on the earth. Thank You for each day, even with its troubles, trials, hardships and difficulties. With each stroke against us, it drives us closer to You, for our dependence is on Your Son, Jesus Christ. Give us the courage to live for You every day, no matter who or what may come at us. Let our lives reflect the light of Jesus, and present the joy of Him being our Savior and Lord. Grant us the endurance to stay strong in our faith-walk with Jesus so that we might be His witness to the world of your Salvation in Him. Continue to open our eyes to the great possibilities of new life all around us, as we seek Jesus each day. This we pray in His powerful and holy Name. Amen.

⁶ (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, pg. 24)