

Unhindered

May 21, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Acts 23:11; 25:9-12; 28:23-31

Session Outline

1. Comfort for Paul (Acts 23:11)
2. Paul Takes a Stand (Acts 25:9-12)
3. The Gospel Keeps Going (Acts 28:23-31)

Theological Theme

The gospel was spreading and changing lives, but Paul continued to be persecuted and attacked. Christians should be prepared for difficult times as they share the gospel.



Leader Guide

Unhindered

Introduction

According to the group Open Doors, at least 360 million Christians experience high levels of persecution and discrimination. They also reported that almost six thousand Christians were killed for their faith in 2022.¹

In 2021, Christianity Today stated, “Every day, 13 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith. Every day, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked. And every day, 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned, and another 5 are abducted.”² Following Jesus has never been without risk, and people around the globe put their lives on the line daily to live out their faith.

- ❓ What surprises you about these statistics on persecution?
- ❓ How did Jesus prepare His followers to face this type of persecution?

Session Summary


Throughout the book of Acts, we see the early church at work and the gospel spreading throughout the world. The apostle Paul experienced extensive persecution and mistreatment for his faith. He wrote much of the New Testament from places of imprisonment or during times of persecution. As a person who previously was a persecutor of the faith, he responded to his own trials from a different perspective.

Those who want to live out their faith and make a difference for the kingdom of God should be willing and prepared to face persecution and discrimination just as Paul did. He demonstrated the value of facing tough times with joy because God is honored through our faithfulness and will reward it in eternity.


1. Comfort for Paul (Acts 23:11)

This verse follows the account of Paul standing before the Sanhedrin, a council of Pharisees and Sadducees, to plead his case and explain his faith. This caused a huge uproar and much division among those listening. It was bad enough that the commander worried that Paul might be torn apart by the crowd. (See Acts 23:1-10.)

Verse 11 picks up after what had to have been a very tough night for Paul. Imagine the thoughts he might have battled as he reviewed the events leading up to his current situation. When you step out in faith and speak up about your own changed life in Jesus, there is an opportunity for the enemy to attack. While we don't know for certain what was on Paul's mind following these events, it is clear he was facing a very difficult situation. Think about when you struggle most with negative thoughts over a turn of events—it is in the dark of night that things often seem the worst.


-  When have you wrestled with a difficult situation through the night? How does the setting of the night often accompany our thoughts in these moments?

Scripture tells us that in the dark of the following night, Jesus came to stand with Paul and comfort him. As is often the case in our lives, Jesus did not come to immediately relieve Paul of his difficulty but to stand with Paul as he endured the difficulty. No one else was in that prison with Paul, but he was never alone.

-  Read Matthew 28:20. How does this verse, along with Jesus's promises regarding the Holy Spirit (see John 14; 16), remind us that Jesus is also with us no matter what we face? How does that change your perspective on the difficulties you face in Jesus's name?

Jesus was not just present with Paul; He spoke words of comfort to him. No one knows what we need in any given moment more accurately than our Savior. Notice that Jesus told Paul to take courage or in some translations to “be of good cheer.” It was clear that Paul needed courage, not only about what had just transpired, but also for what was coming next. Paul didn't know exactly what he would face next, but he was reminded Jesus would be with him there too. Jesus has the encouragement and comfort we need, no matter the situation.


Jesus pointed out that Paul had been a good witness in Jerusalem but that there was more to be done. He told Paul that his work was now to testify in Rome. This is a good reminder that sometimes our stand of faith may not have the visible results we hope for. Even so, that is not our responsibility. Our job, like Paul's, is to testify and be witnesses every opportunity we get. The results are not up to us but to the Lord. As we remain faithful to follow Jesus's call to spread the gospel, He will give us more opportunities to do so. This gives us confidence and encouragement to keep on even when times are tough.

 Application: What is God calling you to do that gives you confidence He is using you and you have purpose in Him?


2. Paul Takes a Stand (Acts 25:9-12)

Following a failed murder plot against Paul in Acts 23, he was held in Caesarea where Festus was the governing authority at the beginning of Acts 25. Festus was concerned with keeping the Jews happy and with administering justice. Because Paul was a Roman citizen, Festus struggled with how to handle his case. At the beginning of this passage, Festus asked Paul about his willingness to be tried in Jerusalem.

But Paul took a stand on his Roman citizenship and demanded to be sent to Rome to be tried by Caesar. He would receive a fair trial in Rome as opposed to the plot against him in Jerusalem. As a Roman citizen he had the right to be heard by Caesar and had been called by Jesus to testify about Him in Rome. His calling to take the gospel to Rome motivated him to take a stand when faced with this question from Festus.

 How did Paul's actions give an example of faithfulness to Jesus's call in less-than-ideal circumstances?


Paul made it clear that he had done nothing wrong to offend the Jews and refused to be tried by them in Jerusalem. He also stated he was not scared to die if that was what he deserved. Yet, Paul knew the accusations against him were unfounded.

 How does Paul's attitude about death speak to you or challenge you in some way? How does this show that Paul's primary aim was not self-preservation but honoring Jesus?

Paul's Citizenship


Likely aware of the ongoing plan to murder him, Paul avoided Jerusalem by invoking his right as a Roman citizen to appeal directly to Caesar. Not all such appeals were granted by local governors, but Festus was glad to shift this case to another jurisdiction and free himself of the pressure to appease the Jews (see note at 26:32).

Believers are to respect and honor those appointed to authority but also recognize that God has a purpose for them in these moments. When Paul demanded to be heard by Caesar, he spoke of Caesar Nero who was in power at that time. Nero later became a notorious enemy of Christians but during those few years was regarded as a wise and just leader. Based on his own experiences, the comfort and counsel of Jesus, and his knowledge of the plot against his life, Paul trusted that God would provide for him.


 Application: What difficult or bold thing is God calling you to do? How will you trust Him and obey?

3. The Gospel Keeps Going (Acts 28:23-31)

After facing several more trials along the way, Acts 28 finally finds Paul in Rome. The Jewish community gathered around him, and we read that he taught them day and night about Jesus. He shared about the kingdom of God and related to the Jews using language they would connect with as he shared the truth about Jesus. Again, we are reminded Paul was not responsible for what resulted in the hearts of the hearers but for his faithfulness in taking advantage of the opportunities as they came. Some were convinced and believed while others did not.

 How does it encourage you that the results of your sharing the gospel are not your responsibility?

Paul quoted Isaiah's words that many hearts would be hardened and people would miss out on the truth when they heard it. Paul's ongoing desire to share the truth of the gospel showed his concern for them, even when they rejected his message. Even though Jesus is the One who must change the hearts of those who hear the gospel, it is right for us to feel a great degree of concern for those who hear the message.

 What level of concern do you have for others to hear and receive the truth of the gospel? How does your life support your answer?

Paul went on to say if the Jews would not receive the gospel message, it would be taken to those who would receive it. Paul was referring to the Gentiles, and this did not sit well with many of the Jews who listened. The crowd left with the dispute continuing between those who believed and those who did not.

Paul continued in this way for two years as he waited to go to trial. There is no concrete evidence of why this took so long, but Paul did not waste a minute of his waiting. He received all who came to him, teaching about Jesus every chance he had. Paul's house arrest kept him from traveling, but he had freedom to teach anyone who came to him. During these years in Rome, it is believed that Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. God never wastes our time; He can use every situation and circumstance for His purposes.

Although Paul did eventually have to stand trial, it seems as if these charges against him did not hold. Some scholars estimate that he had about four or five more years of freedom until he was charged and tried again in Rome. The last words of the book of Acts tell that Paul kept "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (v. 31). We may be prone to identify many things we've read in the life of Paul as hindrances. Yet Paul showed that nothing can hinder the work of God and His people if we are willing to step out in faith and follow Him with boldness.



Application: What threatens to hinder you from obeying God? How can you overcome this obstacle by relying on God's power?

Conclusion

Paul faced and overcame many moments of persecution and discrimination for his faith. In one of the darkest days of his life and ministry, Paul received comfort and encouragement from Jesus Himself. Jesus has assured all His followers that He is with us always even if we can't see Him. This assurance can keep us going just as it did for Paul in prison that night. Instead of giving in to self-doubt or negative feelings, we can stand firm knowing that there is more God has for us as we press on.

Paul's imprisonment and continued trust in Jesus eventually took him to Rome, where he was able to share with those who came from all over to hear him preach and teach about Jesus. Paul stayed true to his calling even in the face of great difficulties. God used him to take the gospel to new places and new people. Paul was continually faithful to God's call on his life, but the results were not up to him, and not everyone who heard the truth believed. All followers of Jesus would do well to remember that our job is to share truth boldly and without hindrance but leave the results up to the Lord.

- ❓ How have you let difficulties or trials keep you from being a faithful witness for Jesus?
- ❓ How can our group remind and encourage one another that Jesus is with us no matter what we face?
- ❓ How will you make a regular practice of praying intentionally for those who are being persecuted for their faith around the world?

DxD This Week

Call to Action

Have an intentional time of prayer for multiplication and our global workers in unreached areas of the world.

Prayer of Response

Thank God for being with you in every situation. Ask Him to give you confidence and boldness in Him. Commit to standing firm and being a witness for Jesus's sake. Pray for strength for those who are being persecuted for their faith around the world.

Additional Resources

- Acts by R. Kent Hughes
- Acts by Ajith Fernando
- Acts by John Polhill

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

For Next Week

Session Title

- Graduation Day

Main Passages

- Jeremiah 29:11

Memorize

The following night, the Lord stood by him and said, "Have courage! For as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so it is necessary for you to testify in Rome." - Acts 23:11

Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 23:11

23:11. Not that night, but the night following the next day Paul experienced the fourth of five visions he received in Acts (16:9; 18:9–10; 22:17–21; 27:23–24). This message emphasized God’s control over all these events and offered courage. Mainly, Jesus informed Paul that these trial appearances have not been defenses for his life, but rather witness of the truth.

Furthermore, this witness would continue all the way to Rome. Finally, the missionary rabbi received confirmation from heaven regarding plans he had already expressed (19:21).³

Acts 25:11

25:10–11. Things were getting shaky. One could not trust a politician in the first century, especially when the issue of favoritism kept surfacing during his early days in office. Paul had finally come to the bottom line and wanted to silence this talk about going back to Jerusalem once and for all. Let’s not miss the contrast here with Jesus’ trial at which he stood silent in the face of all charges. Paul was not only verbal, he became downright defiant in telling Festus that he knew very well that these trumped-up charges were nonsense.

Was Paul wrong because he didn’t behave like Jesus? Jesus was headed for the cross, and he knew it; any discussions with Pilate or anyone else would have been futile in the Father’s plan. Paul, though not afraid of dying, certainly did not have that in his plans at this point. If he would have to face a death sentence, it would have to come from a Roman court, not a frenzied Sanhedrin in their holy city. Apparently in Paul’s view all other appeals had been exhausted, so he declared the Roman fifth amendment and appealed to the emperor, an appeal reflected several more times before Acts ends (25:11–12, 21, 25–26; 26:32; 28:19).⁴

Acts 28:23-31

28:23 Like the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13–35), Paul showed how both the Law of Moses and the Prophets pointed to Jesus as God’s Messiah.

28:24 Elsewhere in Acts the verb were persuaded refers to genuine conversion.

28:25–27 Luke identifies the turning point in the discussion as Paul’s provocative statement that the Holy Spirit was right about Israel’s spiritual stubbornness through Isaiah the prophet (Is 6:9–10). Since Paul said this in response to those who “did not believe” (v. 24) what he was saying about Jesus, his citation of Isaiah clearly implied that the coming of Jesus Christ and his rejection by the Jews were foretold in the OT.

28:30–31 The book of Acts ends in an unexpectedly open-ended fashion. Paul remained a prisoner two whole years. During this time he lived at his own expense and was allowed to have visitors to whom he proclaimed his message boldly and without hindrance. Church tradition has long held that Paul was beheaded during the persecution instigated by the Roman emperor Nero (AD 64 or 65). It is possible that Paul was executed in Rome after the “two whole years,” though

church historian Eusebius believed Paul was released from Roman imprisonment, only to be rearrested at a later date, sent to Rome, and executed. The fact that Luke does not write of Paul's execution leads some scholars to conclude that Luke wrote the book of Acts previous to Paul's execution, though it is possible that Luke chose not to discuss the details of Paul's death because his aim was to show that God had fulfilled his purpose in Paul: taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul's preaching day and night in the seat of the pagan Roman Empire ensured that Christianity would become an international phenomenon, not just a regional religious anomaly.⁵

References

1. CT Editors, "The 50 Countries Where It's Hardest to Follow Jesus in 2023," News & Reporting (Christianity Today, January 17, 2023), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/january/christian-persecution-2023-countries-open-doors-watch-list.html>.
2. CT Editors, "The 50 Countries Where It's Most Dangerous to Follow Jesus in 2021," News & Reporting (Christianity Today, January 13, 2021), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/january/christian-persecution-2021-countries-open-doors-watch-list.html>.
3. Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, vol. 5, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 389.
4. *Ibid.*, 417-418.
5. M. David Sills, "Opportunities and Challenges in Global Missions," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1771.

Author Bio

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Ajith Fernando (ThM, DD) served for thirty-five years as the National Director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka and now serves as its Teaching Director. He is a Bible expositor with a worldwide ministry. Ajith studied at Asbury Theological Seminary and Fuller Seminary and spends much of his time mentoring and counseling Christian workers. He is a visiting lecturer at Colombo Theological Seminary.

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