

Awaken:  
You must testify also in Rome!  
Acts 21-23  
February 3, 2008

I have some friends whom I have known for a long time. They do not attend a church or, more importantly, have a real relationship with Jesus Christ. Our relationship can be a bit difficult at times. These friends obviously would know what I do for living. Also, they have been invited to church on several different occasions. Now, those of you who know me know that I do not fit the mold of your traditional church pastor. Those of you who know me also know that my approach to life and ministry is not inside the mold of the usual pastor. And, if you are here today you know that our church does fit the mold of the usual church. However, we are an inextricable part of what has come before us. No matter how different I may be or we as a church might be, we are viewed in light of the larger whole.

Can you imagine how I must feel when I dialogue with folks, even friends, who have put me inside of the box that they have always perceived pastors or churches to fit? It is difficult and many times I just want to give up trying to prove that they don't have to act differently around me or they don't have to act differently to worship at this church. It is exhausting to continue in the mode of relationship building and repairing and feeling like you do not get any further ahead of where you started.

This same phenomenon is true in many different areas of life. In marriage sometimes you may feel like you are fighting an uphill fight that is as much of a hill as Mt. Everest. Many of us are parents and a lot of time you feel like you are running on a treadmill. You know you are working hard because there is sweat dripping everywhere but as you look around the scenery is not changing. Another great example is repetitive sin. There can be a sin in our lives in which we feel like we repent from every day only to fall to it again the next. We reach a point of despair and just want to hang up our hat resolute to the idea we are just going to accept the thought of not overcoming the sin, not finding fulfillment in our marriage, not raising Godly children, and not ever making an impact on the lives of friends and family.

I wonder if all of us could get outside of ourselves a bit and take a different look at things – get a change in perspective. When God looks down at us what does he think? Does he feel the same exasperation as we do when we look at our relationships or our marriage? Does he just want to throw in the towel and stop trying to get us to the place in life that he so desperately desires us to be? This is one of the most encouraging characteristics of God – he never gives up on us. For some of us this is easy to understand because we had father figures that exemplified this for us. For others of us it is not as easy because we did not have this kind of father figure in our lives.

In Joshua chapter 1 we see the passing of the baton from Moses to Joshua. Although Moses made some mistakes, these were huge shoes to fill by Joshua. In verse 5 the Lord says to Joshua, *“No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give to them. Only be strong*

*and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go.*” The Lord is telling Joshua that he will never give up on him and that he will always be with him. He is challenging Joshua to be strong and courageous – strong and very courageous – to the journey ahead.

Last week we began a new series titled *Awaken: Awaken to the life you were created to live*. Last week we saw Paul’s final words to his close friends in Ephesus with whom he served for three years. This week we pick up the story in Acts 21. Every week we are traveling through the scriptures but we travel through them differently each week. Some weeks we look at the director’s cut by examining the scenes in considerable detail. Other weeks we watch the movie and swim in the themes that we find. This week we are definitely watching the movie, as we will travel through three chapters of text to look at a specific period of Paul’s life. Take a look at this quick video clip.

*Video Clip: Narnia – Lucy going through the wardrobe for the first time...*

You can probably imagine how Lucy felt as she moves through the wardrobe. The view and cool breeze is refreshing and exciting but the journey she begins is not easy. There are many of us who are in this spot right now. God wants us to open the wardrobe and enter a new world of life that is refreshing, new, and different. But, it brings its own challenges, challenges that we do not have to go through alone. God wants us to awaken to a new life of not only doing things differently but also looking at things differently.

Last week in Paul’s farewell address he told his friends that he was headed to Jerusalem. He did not know what he was going to do there but he knew that he needed to go. We pick up in chapter 21 where Paul is on that journey to Jerusalem. He is first trying to go to Caesarea because there is a direct route for him to take between Caesarea and Jerusalem. Paul begins to get resistance from even his own friends regarding his trip to Jerusalem. In verse 4 he is told by his friends not to go, and then in verses 10-12 he is told not to go as well. In verse 4 it says, “through the spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.” Then in verse 10 he meets up with a prophet who warns him not to go. In verse 10 we read, “While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’”

It is one thing for Paul to get resistance from those who oppose him but another from his friends. Have you ever felt resistance from someone you thought was on your side? This would have been hard for Paul because he would have expected support from his friends. We can see the emotion in Paul’s response, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” Resistance is coming at Paul from all angles. Of course his enemies are opposing him, they are trying to kill him with every chance they have. Now, even Paul’s friends are trying to discourage Paul from what he feels called to do. However, Paul is resolute to his singular focus. We saw this same determination last week as Paul told the Ephesian elders, “I did not shrink back from declaring to you anything.”

Friends, everything in this world will pull at you trying to move you away from the path on which God has called you. Our culture of materialism will pull you away from being the sacrificial giver God wants you to be. Our culture of divorce will pull you away from giving every ounce of yourself to fight for your marriage. Our culture of lust will make you think it is normal and acceptable to engage in adultery. Our culture of busy spirituality will make you think that you need a church that fills your schedule rather than one that expects you to build relationships with your neighbors. Friends, we have to be resolute to the call God has placed on our lives. We must fight tooth and nail to remain faithful to his voice over the voice of our world. This requires incredible strength and incredible resolve. This is why those words the Lord spoke to Joshua are so important. “Be strong and courageous... I will not leave you or forsake you.”

In verse 17 Paul arrives at Jerusalem and is met warmly by James and the elders. They celebrate with him in what God has done through him. Then after just a few short sentences of encouragement, the leaders tell Paul of his reputation there and the immanent danger. Beginning in verse three the elders give Paul some surprising instruction. They tell Paul to live in observance of the law. Did Paul have to live under the law any longer? No, of course not. Paul was under the grace of Christ that was afforded him in Christ’s death on the cross. Paul knew that the sacrificial system was over and it received no favor in the eyes of God. However, Paul was asked to live inside the culture even though he was no longer spiritually required to do so. They asked him to do this, we can only guess, in hopes that he could do ministry inside the culture and remain faithful to the gospel.

This is a message that we have talked about many times here at The Crossings. We frequently discuss our calling to live in this culture while not being of this culture. That is what is being asked of Paul, live inside the cultural observances but do not become one of the “culturals.” However, we can quickly see that this did not work for Paul. In verses 27-30 Paul is accused of defiling the temple in several different ways and “teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law.” This is not a true indictment on Paul. He was not trying to turn people against the Jews and it was not even his desire to defile the temple. This was their perception. Paul was not even trying to turn people against the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses has an incredible amount to teach us even today. However, what Paul wanted them to know was that there was more to the story. They only have half of the news yet their perception of him and his ministry proved to be his indictment.

I will have to confess to you that I enjoy harassing my family. Lori will tell you that I will do a lot of different things just to get a rise out of her. I am the same way with our kids. If I want to see Bethany frantically come out of her skin, I will find something that resembles a fly and toss it at her. She is so incredibly scared of flies. The funny thing is that you cannot convince her that she has no reason to be scared of that fly. I can know beyond the shadow of a doubt that a fly is not going to hurt her but her perception is her reality – and there is no telling her otherwise. So many of you who are followers of Christ are put inside a box much like Paul was whether you fit there or not. As soon as someone finds out that you claim the “C” word then you have been categorized. You are hypocritical, anti-intellectual, dumb right wing, homosexual hating, and chauvinist. And this is all decided before they have a chance to really get to know who you are.

Again, we can throw in the towel or we can continue to be obedient. We can throw in the towel to our culture or we can be faithful in the fight of exalting the name of Jesus Christ. We

cannot do both – it is one or the other. There is no such thing as a tie in the arena of life devotion. Many of you are familiar with the words of Jesus as he gives the Sermon on the Mount and says, “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” This is not like those multiple-choice exams where you could pick A, B, and sometimes C. This is an A or B question and there are no other options.

Well, needless to say, Paul pushes ahead staying faithful to the call before him. This is such an amazing story. This crowd is just foaming to kill Paul. Paul, while they are screaming “away with him” is asking the officials if he can address the crowd. In verse 37 Paul is asking, “May I say something to you?” These specific leaders who came to stop the riot do not seem to know who Paul is based on their response to his question. After continued perseverance Paul is granted permission to speak to the crowd – the same crowd that has asked for his head. Beginning in the first verse of chapter 22 Paul begins telling them about Jesus and the transformation that has taken place in his own life. You should read this sometime this week. Paul gives his personal testimony of how Jesus wrecked his old life and offered him more than he could have ever imagined. Then, after pouring out his heart, Paul finishes only to hear in verse 22, “Away with such a fellow from the earth!” This is not a response that a pastor or teacher likes to hear after he pours out his heart.

In verse 24 we see that the tribune ordered him to be examined by flogging. I don’t know about you guys but I don’t think examining Paul by flogging makes much sense. I’m sure Paul was willing to tell them anything they wanted to know without the flogging. Paul is not going to wait to tell them he is a Roman citizen like he did last time. Paul was willing to suffer but not if there was another option. Paul would even tell us that suffering for the sake of suffering itself is senseless. So in verse 30 Paul is unbound and taken to the council and the High Priest Ananias.

I can’t glide by the beginning of this exchange in chapter 23. Paul says, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.” After saying this, Ananias commands the guards standing next to Paul to hit him. We see a glimpse here of Paul’s flesh – Paul was not the perfect, sinless man that Jesus was. Paul says to Ananias, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!” This metaphor of a whitewashed wall was common in Paul’s day. He was referencing a wall that appeared to be in pristine order but was truly crumbling beneath the thin veneer of paint. Well, as it would be no surprise to us at this point, verse 10 finds Paul getting another beating. However, we are at what I think is the climax of the movie we are observing today.

In verse 11 we see some very powerful words of the Lord that are spoken to Paul. The Lord says, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.” The Lord is saying that Paul is not finished. Paul’s days will not end here in Jerusalem. God has a bigger plan than Paul falling to the hand of Ananias or any of the other crowds who have tried to dismantle him. Paul’s work is not finished! Friends, I do not believe we would be in the midst of this text and this series if many of us did not need to hear these words today. God is beckoning us to awaken to the surrendered life. God desires us to awaken to a life of purpose where we are willing to endure anything for the sake of the one who died on the cross on our behalf. The question is, are you willing to do what it takes to continue to Rome?

God is calling for endurance and God is calling for finishers who are willing to finish the task he has laid before them.

Your Rome, or your destination, that God is laying on your heart may be in relation to your marriage, your children, your friends and family, or your church. It could even be in regards to retirement. Rather than finding a nice wicker rocking chair, God may have something entirely different in mind. I beg you to answer the question, what is the Rome God has already called you to which you need to recommit your life to? I can tell you one example in my life. God has called me to never quit at this church planting, gospel exalting, life-transforming endeavor. This is a commitment that I have made to the Creator of the universe. I have some really rough days and really rough weeks. I have my share of nights without rest and days full of stress. All of this doesn't matter because God has called me to go to Rome and this is my focus through any difficulty and frustration that comes my way.

God has called me to lead my home. Even above being a Pastor to any of you or those who will come in the future, I am husband and father. If I have to leave something undone regarding my work in order to keep my pursuit of Godly husbandry and fatherhood in tact then so be it. I am going to Rome and I must not let anything get in my way. It is so hard to build new relationships. The stereotypes that I have to overcome and the questions that always have to be answered are exhausting. The stereotypical box that I have to scrape my way out of before anyone can ever begin to know who Matt truly is... But, I know this is something God has called me to do. This is my Rome and I must move ahead with a singular focus of doing whatever it takes to build relationships with those who are far from Jesus. I must do everything I can to claw my way through those stereotypes so that a true relationship might form and others might come to know who Jesus is through my family and me. These are all "Romes" which I must pursue relentlessly.

Friends, you are going to have people oppose you – even those you thought never would. You are going to have to fight through a culture that is doing everything it can to peel you away from your Savior. You are going to need incredible endurance. The only way that we will be able to push ahead to this Rome is by awakening to the life God has created us to live – a life of pursuit, perseverance, and a life of power only found in surrender.

As we finish I want to share this one story with you. This was several months ago, it was Saturday morning and I was headed on a decent bike ride with a few guys. We had decided that we were going to ride a little over 50 miles that morning. When we began, I wasn't completely aware of it but only three out of the four of us knew how far we were going to ride. It became abundantly clear to me that one guy didn't know when our odometers were reading about 25 miles and he said something like, "only 10 more miles, nothing to it." At that moment I realized that we had still not told him that we were actually only half way done. When I gave him the news I could tell it was a little deflating. He made it through the ride fine, but from that point forward he was not doing quite as well.

We have a tendency to focus on asking God to reveal to us very specific details within his desire for our lives. I believe that we miss the boat with this many times. There are many times that God is not going to tell us exactly how many miles you are going to ride today. He may not tell you exactly where you should work, or how many kids to have. However, God has given a pretty clear picture of what he has called us to do. I can promise those of you who are married

that God has called you to fight with everything in you for your marriage. I can promise those of you who are parents that God has called you to fight with everything in you to be primary faith teacher in your children's life. God may not tell us exactly how many miles to ride but he tells us to do it with a singular focus of serving him and exalting his name. He calls us to serve him with endurance, pushing our way through all of the things around us trying to pull us away from him. He calls us to finish strong. He calls us to go to Rome, continue on the journey of transformation and invite others to join with us.

Awaken:  
You must testify also in Rome!  
Acts 21-23  
February 3, 2008

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What stereotypes do you hold – certain careers, people who live in specific neighborhoods, people who drive a certain type of vehicle?
2. What stereotypes do you think people have about you? Why? Are you true to the stereotype?
3. Do you think people have you inside the “Christian” stereotype?
4. Do you feel like it is easy or difficult for you to build new relationships? What are some aspects of it that make it difficult for you?
5. What areas of your life require spiritual endurance – relationship, parenting, jobs, etc.?
6. On Sunday Matt talked about the Lord’s words to Paul in verse 11, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.” What are some things that come to mind in your life that might represent “Rome”? In other words, what direction has God given you that you need to recommit to?
7. What can this group do to help/support you in the journey toward that “Rome”?