

# “THOU HAST TESTIFIED OF ME”

ACTS 21-28

INTRODUCTION: Part of the baptismal covenant is a commitment to “stand as a witness of God at all times and in all things, and in all places . . . even unto death.” The construction of this phrase appeals to me. We are to “stand” as witnesses: not sit, not kneel, not recline—stand! The selection of this word to be a part of this covenant is more than grammatical fortune. Most of the time when we deliver our witness of God and his work, especially to a hostile audience, we will be standing.

I was in a college Sociology class following my mission. The teacher was engaging. His lectures reached into my heart and mind and I enjoyed almost everything he did. Almost. In spite of repeated claims that he was a member of the church and an active one (he told us he taught Gospel Doctrine in a local ward), he seldom skipped an opportunity to criticize the church. He may have done this from an inflated sense of the need to make his students (who were mostly Latter-day Saints) to think for themselves, or from a sincere belief that the church was too autocratic. At any rate, I learned early in the course that he would challenge my willingness to “stand as a witness” from time to time.

The first time it happened, the discussion had turned to the Mountain Meadows Massacre. I am not sure now, at a distance of 34 years, how we got from sociology to Iron County but we were there and Dr. Whoever it was directed a searching discussion into the causes of that tragic event. At one point, because of a comment from an interested but unformed non-member student, the professor observed that to his certain knowledge, the death of the wagon train members at Mountain Meadows had been ordered by Brigham Young himself.

I was jerked from my cautious interest in the discussion—a non-participant anxious to get on to other less controversial things—to a position of responsibility. I knew that what I had just heard was not true. I had studied enough church history and read enough of the documents about this event to know that Brigham Young tried desperately to prevent the least inconvenience from coming to the members of the wagon train. I thought about making that very point. I have just returned from two years of standing

as a witness. But I was in a class of perhaps one hundred and seventy students (this was a required undergraduate class) and I was surrounded by strangers. I was reluctant to make a display of myself, and besides, my declaration would not matter that much anyway, would it? I sat, wrestling with myself in the silence following this statement, hoping the discussion would turn in another direction.

And then, exactly in front of me, a young woman stood. Her hands gripped the back of the chair before her. Her voice was tight and she quivered with emotion. “Dr. Whoever you are, I’m a new member of this church. I was baptized less than a year ago. I’ve never even heard of the Mountain Meadow Massacre, so I don’t know what you’re talking about. But I know you are wrong!” And she sat down.

This was, I believe, the most powerful lesson I learned in college. No teacher ever reached into my heart the way her simple, powerful testimony did. She was willing to stand as a witness when I was not. But I made a promise to myself that day, studying the back of her head, consumed by my own shame. I told myself that I would never sit again when it was time for me to stand. This is a promise I have tried to keep.

As we study Acts 21-28, we will see again and again Paul standing as a witness. He would have been on his feet in an instant in that class, his eyes blazing, his voice like “the roaring of a lion.” Joseph Smith described Paul in this way:

“He is about five feet high; very dark hair, dark complexion; dark skin; large Roman nose; sharp face; small black eyes, penetrating as eternity; round shoulders; a whining voice, except when elevated, and then it almost resembled the roaring of a lion. He was a good orator, active and diligent, always employing himself in doing good to his fellow man.” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 1839–42, p.180)

When you finish this lesson and your study of these scriptures, perhaps you will describe him as Alma said all baptized disciples should be described—as one who was willing to “stand as a witness of God at all times and in all things, and in all places . . . even unto death.”

## **I. PAUL REPORTS ON HIS JOURNEYS AND FACES AN ANGRY MOB IN JERUSALEM (Acts 21,22)**

Paul sailed into Syria and landed at Tyre. He found disciples there and spent a week with them. They knew, by the Spirit that troubles awaited Paul in Jerusalem, and told him “that he should not go up . . .” (Acts 21:4) But after a week he departed and came finally to Caesarea, and to the house of Philip, one of the seven, who had begun his work in Caesarea twenty-five years before. (See Acts 8:40) He stayed there for “many days” and was finally visited by a prophet from Judea named Agabus.

And when he was come . . . he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. (Acts 21:11)

Like the people of Tyre, the saints of Caesarea pled with Paul not to complete this journey. “And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem.” (Acts 21:12) But Paul knew that we was supposed to go to Jerusalem.

And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there. (Acts 20:22)

And so Paul, who wanted his life and his words to stand as witnesses, answered, “

What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 21:12,13)

What kind of report is Paul giving in 21:19? What concern do some have about the *report* of Paul's teachings? (21:21) They ask Paul to take four men who are ready to conclude a Nazarite vow (see Numbers 6:1-8) into the temple to demonstrate that he himself “walkest orderly and keepeth the law.” (21:24)

While he is in the temple, Asian Jews make a fearful charge against Paul.

What is it ? (21:27,28) You can imagine the uproar if a well-known Mormon in your area brought non-members into the temple. Such a thing was explicitly forbidden according to inscribed stone markers still in existence. Any Gentiles brought within the bounds of the court of the temple would be killed. Of course Paul had not brought Gentiles into the temple, but the four men mentioned by James who were under the vow.

What was the result of this accusation? (21:30,31) Paul was rescued from this fearful beating (“they went about to kill him”) by the Romans. As they conducted him from the scene of the tumult and into the Antonia Fortress, Paul made a request: “I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people.” (21:39)

Paul, ever the witness, desired now to bear his testimony to people who had just discontinued their attempt to beat him to death. This might have been a good time to disappear into the Roman fortress near the temple and wait for things to cool down. But Paul had spent many years testifying of the divinity of Christ, and he wanted to do so now. These people must not regard the disciples of Jesus as men who would profane the temple. Paul stood on the steps of the Antonia Fortress and told the story of his rigorous Jewish upbringing and of his conversion and his ministry among the Gentiles. (Acts 22:3-22)

## **II. PAUL IS TAKEN BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN (Acts 22:22-23:35)**

The people rejected his witness, but that was not the most important thing. Paul knew that true disciples stand as witnesses regardless of the way people respond. In fact, Paul would for the next two years bear witness of Christ at every opportunity except one. When he was allowed to speak to the “chief priests and all their counsel,” (Acts 22:30) he did not give his testimony. These were the men most responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. Why might have prevented Paul from testifying to these people? Might it be this:

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you. (3 Nephi 14:6)

For it is not meet that the things which belong to the children of

the kingdom should be given to them that are not worthy, or to dogs, or the pearls to be cast before swine. (D&C 41:6)

It is clear that these wicked men tried to “turn again and rend” Paul. Read the account of the murder plot in Acts 23:12-24. What message did the Lord give Paul the night after his confrontation with the Sanhedrin? (Acts 23:11) Note the instruction given to Paul in this verse and the reason for that instruction. “*Be of good cheer, Paul, for thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness in Rome*” Even though his testifying had been apparently fruitless, useless, the rattling of divine words in the shells of empty souls, Paul was still told to be of good cheer because he had had the privilege to stand as a witness in Jerusalem, and would yet have other opportunities to do the same thing.

### **III. PAUL STANDS AS A WITNESS BEFORE AGRIPPA, BUT HIS TESTIMONY IS REJECTED (Acts 24-25)**

Paul, to avoid the murder plot being hatched against him, was taken to Caesarea, the capitol of Roman Judea, and the residence of Felix, the Roman governor. After five days, Ananias and other members of the Sanhedrin came to Caesarea to tell Felix about Paul. They brought a public speaker (an orator) to deliver their message about Paul. This man accused Paul of being a “pestilent fellow,” a “mover of sedition,” a “ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes,” and one who had “gone about to profane the temple.” (Acts 24: 5,6)

When Paul was permitted to speak in his own defense, he made these points:

1. I was not arousing the people in the Temple. (24:12)
2. I was not arousing the people in the city (24:12)
3. I was not arousing the people in the synagogue (24:12)
4. I do worship in a way that they call heresy (24:14)
5. I believe everything that is written in the law and the prophets (24:14)
6. I have hope toward God of a resurrection of all men (24:15)
7. I try always to have a clear conscience toward God (24:16)

Paul spoke eloquently in his own defense, and Festus deferred the matter,

he said, until he could question the Roman centurion in Jerusalem. What reason does 24:26 suggest for Festus' decision to keep Paul at Caesarea?

Some time later ("after certain days") Felix came with his wife Drusilla and sent for Paul. Of what did Paul speak (24:24) What other message did Paul deliver with his reasoning? (24:25) How did Felix respond? (24:25) Do you not find it wonderful that Paul is always willing to bear his testimony?

How long was Paul at Caesarea before a new governor came? (24:27) The bitterness of Paul's enemies is amazing. After all this time, during the visit of the governor to Jerusalem, the high priest tried to turn Festus against Paul, and besought him to bring Paul to Jerusalem. Why? (25:1-3) Festus invited them back to Caesarea where they could bring their accusations of wickedness against Paul (25:4,5) To this some at least agreed. They came to Caesarea and "stood round about, and laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not prove." (25:7) Paul answered for himself, but Festus wanted to take Paul to Jerusalem. Paul, instead of agreeing, said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged: to the Jews have I done no wrong, as thou very well knowest." (25:10) Why do you think Paul prolonged his imprisonment in this manner (see 26:32) What did the Lord tell Paul in Acts 23:11?

What problem does Festus have with regard to the sending of Paul to Caesar? (25:27) Who does he invite to hear the matter with him to help him know what to write? (25:26) Paul, after recounting his aggressions against the church, bears powerful witness of his conversion, and of Christ. When Paul was converted, what did he do?

I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and [then] to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance. For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me. (26:19-21)

Notice the way in which Paul summarizes his life since his conversion:

Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day,

witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles. (26:22,23)

This testimony reminds me very much of Alma's declaration to his son Helaman in Alma 36:24: "Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost."

What was the response of Festus to Paul's witness? (26:24) What was King Agrippa's response? (26:28) Agrippa used the word "Almost." Of that word and its usage in this context, President Harold B. Lee taught:

We were back East a short time ago and a good bishop made an interesting comment about what he called the saddest words that he knows of a man in high station. He read from the words in the days of the Apostle Paul when Paul before King Agrippa had borne his powerful testimony of his conversion. King Agrippa's reply was, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." (Acts 26:28.) Then the bishop said, "The king knew the truth but he lacked the courage to do that which would be required; and he could only say then, 'Almost thou persuadest,' almost persuaded under certain circumstances to do the thing the Lord would want him to do."

And then he characterized some things that he discovered in his own ward in a short but powerful sermon. "In response to the Master, 'Come . . . follow me' (Mark 10:21), some members almost," he said, "but not quite, say, 'thou persuadest me almost to be honest but I need extra help to pass a test' . . . ."

"Almost thou persuadest me to keep the Sabbath day holy, but it's fun to play ball on Sunday.

"Almost thou persuadest me to love my neighbor, but he is a

rascal; to be tolerant of others' views, but they are dead wrong; to be kind to sister, but she hit me first- to go home teaching but it's so cold and damp outside tonight; to pay tithes and offerings, but we do need a new color TV set; to find the owner of a lost watch, but no one returned the watch I lost; to pass the Sacrament, but I've graduated from the deacons now, almost thou persuadest me to be reverent, but I had to tell my pal about my date last night; almost thou persuadest me to attend stake leadership meeting, but I know more than the leader on that subject, so why should I go. Thou persuadest me almost to go to Sacrament meeting but there is going to be such an uninteresting speaker tonight. Almost! Almost! Almost! but not quite, not able quite to reach." (Harold B. Lee, Conference Report, April 1964, p.23 - p.24)

## **V. PAUL IS SHIPWRECKED ON HIS WAY TO ROME (Acts 27,28)**

During the shipwrecked journey to Rome, Paul again and again exercised his powers of faith and seership to bless and protect and heal, presenting himself both as a witness and a light.

When he arrived at Rome, he was placed under house arrest (28:16). After three days there what did Paul do? (28:17) Why did Paul say he was bound? (28:20) When many were gathered together, what did Paul teach them? How much of his time did he spend at this work?

And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. (Acts 28:23)

Paul did not have great success in this endeavor, for "some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not."

What did Paul determine therefore to do? (28:28)

And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and

received all that came in unto him, Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him. (28:30,31)

According to the Bible Dictionary, while in Rome Paul “suffered martyrdom, probably in the spring of A.D. 65.”-

As much as any man in the history of the world, Paul stood as a “witness . . . of God at all times and in all things, and in all places . . . even unto death.” (Mosiah 18:9)

### **CONCLUSION:**

Paul not only stood as a witness, but he did it in the face of personal hazard and continuing danger. He said of himself,

Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. (2 Cor. 11: 24-28)

Copyright © 2003 by Ted Gibbons <tedgibbons@yahoo.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.