

Find the Prisoner

by Warren Wiersbe

The sermon emphasizes the importance of a good conscience, the promise of a great hope, and the presence of a gracious Lord in overcoming difficulties and challenges in life.

Duration: 35:36

Scripture: Acts 22:30 - 23:1

Topics: "Faith And Hope", "Steadfast Trust"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the story of Paul and how he remained steadfast and composed in the face of adversity. The speaker identifies three anchors that helped Paul stay strong: the power of a good conscience, the promise of a great hope, and the presence of a gracious Lord. The power of a good conscience refers to the inner judge that approves or accuses our actions. The promise of a great hope is found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which Paul defended. The presence of a gracious Lord provides comfort and strength in difficult times. The speaker encourages the audience to trust in Jesus and remain steadfast in their faith.

Transcript

Acts takes us now to chapter 22, verse 30, through chapter 23, verse 11. Paul is on trial. Acts chapter 22, beginning at verse 30.

On the next day, because he would have known the certainty for what reason he was accused by the Jews, the chief captain loosed him from his bands and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them. And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth.

Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall. For sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law? And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest? Then said Paul, I knew not, brethren, that he was the high priest. For it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.

But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. Of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees

and the Sadducees, and the multitude was divided.

For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel nor spirit, but the Pharisees confess both. And there arose a great cry, and the scribes who were of the Pharisees' party arose and contended sharply, saying, We find no evil in this man, but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God. And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them, and to bring him into the barracks.

And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul, for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome. And so the Lord encourages his servant, and so the Lord encourages us today. The chief captain had a problem.

He had a notable prisoner on his hands and didn't even know what the indictment was. He'd come to the conclusion that the problem basically rested with the Jewish theology. So very wisely he called a meeting of the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, and he presented the Apostle Paul before them as the chief witness.

The Apostle Paul was facing the same group that Jesus had faced, the same council that Stephen had faced, the same council that the apostles had faced. This was the same council that the Apostle Paul had worked for when he had gone out as Saul of Tarsus to persecute the church. He stood before them as a traitor because they knew who he was and they knew what he was doing.

This was one of the difficult days in Paul's life. It seemed as though everything was falling down around him, and there he stood. He couldn't run away.

He was the prisoner of Rome, but really he was the prisoner of Jesus Christ. He had to stand. You have these days.

I have these days. There are some days when everything around you just seems to cave in, when those who used to be your helpers become your persecutors, when circumstances that seem to be going with you start going against you. And yes, there are those days when your past catches up with you.

There are those days when every door seems to be closed, every bridge seems to be blown up, every cloud seems to be a storm cloud, every ring of the telephone is bad news, and you wonder what to do. Paul was facing that kind of a day. Of all of the brave things that Paul ever did, this stands among the bravest.

For there he stands before this group that could indict him to death. This group sent Jesus out to be crucified. This group sent Stephen out to be stoned.

This group chopped off the head of James. Paul stands there before this group with poise and peace, absolute self-control, no fear. And they discover that they are the prisoners, not Paul.

When I read these verses, I say to myself, what was it that enabled Paul to go through that test? Now for you, it may not be facing a council, it may be facing a surgeon, or it may be facing an examination, or it may be facing employment or unemployment, or it may be sitting down and facing mistakes. I don't know what it is. But I'm interested in finding out what it was that kept Paul from being swept away by the storm.

What were the anchors that just kept him sure and steadfast, that kept him from falling apart, that kept him from giving a bad testimony? I think there were three such anchors, and each of these anchors is available to you and me during these difficult days. Anchor number one, the power of a good conscience. Anchor number two, the presence, the promise of a great hope.

Anchor number three, the presence of a gracious Lord. Anchor number one, Paul stood steadfast and firm and didn't flinch, didn't fear, and didn't fall apart because of the power of a good conscience. He stood before this group and said, I have maintained a good conscience until this very day.

Now all of us know what conscience is. I don't have to stand here and give a dissertation on psychology or philosophy or theology. A teenager said one day, conscience is that thing in me that feels bad when everything else feels good.

That's not a bad definition of conscience. Conscience is that inward judge, that monitor who lives with us, who when we have done evil, accuses us. When we have done good, approves us.

Conscience is to the inner man what these windows are to this church, the windows let in the light. And conscience does not produce the light, conscience lets the light come in. The Gospel of John, the Apostle John writes, that was the true light that lighteth every man coming into the world.

There is born into each individual this inward monitor that says this is wrong, this is wrong, or this is right. Now conscience is a judge, not a slave master. Conscience cannot make me do right.

Conscience can only approve when I do right. Conscience cannot keep me from doing wrong. Conscience can only judge me when I do wrong.

But I would trust that you and I would listen to a Spirit-directed conscience. And Paul stood there and he was unafraid. My friend, when you have a good conscience, you can face anybody.

You'll recall when our first parents sinned, they ran. Do you remember what David said when he confessed his sin? Have mercy upon me, O God, according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. My sin is ever before me.

That's conscience. And wherever David looked, he saw his sin. And someone came walking in with a report and he was wondering what's in that report.

He saw two men whispering somewhere in the palace. I wonder what they're talking about. If they had had telephones in those days, the phone would have rung and he would have jumped.

I wonder who's there. I wonder who knows. That's conscience.

Paul stood before these people and he was able to stand strong and firm and unafraid because of the power of a good conscience. What is a good conscience? It's a conscience that works. It's a conscience that is educated by the Word of God, guided by the Spirit of God, that works.

And when we plan to do something wrong, it bothers us. And when we have done something wrong and we've not made it right, we toss and we turn and we can't sleep at night. A good conscience is one that works.

I'm sure you all remember the story Dr. Ironside used to tell about the Indians' definition of conscience. The Indians said conscience is an arrowhead in my heart. And when the Indian does something wrong, the arrowhead turns and it cuts and it hurts.

But if I do wrong enough, it turns so much it wears out the points and doesn't hurt anymore. You see, the Bible tells us that there are several kinds of conscience. Not everybody has a good conscience.

For example, Paul tells us in Titus 1.15 that there is a defiled conscience. If conscience is the window that lets in the light of God's truth, then as that window starts to get dirty, less and less light comes in. And my friend, you and I can make that window dirty.

We can so defile conscience that it no longer works the way it used to work. You say, how do I know? If I am permitting in my life today things that six months ago would have crushed me, my conscience is defiled. That's why when people say, well, my conscience doesn't bother me, that may not speak very well of their conscience.

There's a defiled conscience, and there's also a seared conscience in 1 Timothy 4.2. Paul talks about those who have their conscience seared. That means branded. Have you ever seen anyone who's really been burned? I'll never forget having a phone call several years ago.

They said, rush over to the hospital in Cincinnati. They gave the name of one of our young men. He was taking care of a fire at his plant, and some brilliant person had thrown into this fire a great many of these aerosol cans.

The whole thing just blew up. And when I got to that hospital, I thought to myself, he'll never make it. But he made it.

He's alive today. He's been through surgery after surgery and plastic surgery on top of plastic surgery. But I looked at his hands, and when the scar tissues began to form, they were seared.

That can happen. We can defile the conscience, and we can brand the conscience so that no longer does it convict us anymore. But it gets worse than that.

Hebrews chapter 10 verse 22 talks about an evil conscience. Can you imagine going from a good conscience to a defiled conscience to a seared conscience to an evil conscience? What's an evil conscience? It's one that approves what we do wrong and disapproves what we do right. It's possible for a person so to educate his conscience and so to fight against his conscience that he completely reverses its ministry.

Paul said, I stand before you as a man with a good conscience. Now he proved he had a good conscience. The high priest who happened to be a scoundrel.

He was a crook. He was a religious renegade. When you read the history of the Jewish nation as given to us by Josephus, he has nothing good to say about Ananias.

And Ananias said, strike him in the mouth. And Paul in righteous indignation and rightly so, and I applaud him for doing so. If I had been in the galleries, I would have shouted, amen.

Paul turns and says, the Lord shall smite thee, thou whitened wall. He was using there something that Jesus had said. They're just whitewashed sepulchers.

Something Ezekiel had said. They are just tottering walls that look strong because they're whitewashed, but they're ready to fall apart. The Lord did smite him.

A few years later, he was hiding from his own people who were out to kill him because he had been such a wicked man. Then they said, do you revile the high priest? And instantly Paul's conscience went to work because even though Paul did not respect the man, he respected the office. He didn't know he was the high priest.

How would Paul know who was the high priest? Paul said, I didn't know he was the high priest. The Bible says you shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people. His conscience was working.

Now, Ananias' conscience wasn't working. He was able to do evil to promote his own gain. That's an evil conscience.

Ananias' conscience would have bothered him had he not commanded them to smite Paul. Did you ever notice how a good conscience always brings out the evil that is in people? Let there stand up a Moses, or a David, or a Paul, or a Martin Luther, and it brings out the worst in people who don't have a good conscience. But let there stand up these men among those who have a good conscience, and it brings out the best that's in them.

My friend, there's nothing like the power of a good conscience when you're facing the difficulties of life. I'll tell you why. When difficulties come to us, the first thing we say is, what have I done wrong? So often people say to me, Pastor, what have I done wrong that this should happen to me? I say, I don't know.

Probably nothing. Somehow we feel guilty when difficulty comes, when doors are closed on us, and when problems arise, we feel guilty. We have the idea that everything ought to go smoothly for the child of God.

My friend, there's nothing like a good conscience to enable you to face any circumstance, any challenge, any person, any defeat, any victory, any lie, any accusation, any disappointment. There's nothing like a good conscience, and you can look right into the face of God and say, God, here I stand. I can do none other.

You can look into the faces of men and not flinch and not fear. You can look into the face of difficulty and storm and not be afraid. I am here by God's appointment.

My conscience does not convict me. I am here in the will of God. Let come what may.

Here I stand. Now, somebody here may say, that's well and good, Pastor, but I don't have a good conscience. My conscience convicts me.

I know I couldn't face difficulty. I couldn't face people. If people knew the truth about me, then, my friend, I suggest you go see Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 10, verse 22 says that by the blood of Jesus Christ, even an evil conscience can be purged. And what a wonderful thing it is when a person receives Jesus Christ into his heart, and the blood of Jesus Christ washes that conscience. What a joy it is to see how the compass is set properly, the directions are right, the measurements are right, the weights are right, and conscience goes to work and that life is changed.

My friend, if your conscience is not a good conscience today, you'd better get alone with the Lord Jesus. If you and I are permitting in our lives things that would have kept us awake six months ago, there's something wrong. The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, can cleanse us from all sin.

A second anchor held Paul as he was going through this difficult time, the power of a good conscience and the promise of a great hope. Paul said, I'm standing here defending the hope of Israel, which is wrapped up in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some people accuse Paul of doing a very unchristian thing.

He saw that part of the group was Sadducee, liberal, they didn't believe in the Word of God as did the Pharisees. They accepted the first five books of the Old Testament, that's all. They did not believe in angels, did not believe in spirits, did not believe in the resurrection.

They were the liberals of their day, the naturalists. The Pharisees were the supernaturalists. With all of their tradition and their religion and their self-righteousness, they did have true Bible truth.

They certainly had good doctrine. Paul said, I'm standing here today defending the supernatural. And immediately there was a fight.

Someone says Paul did that to be political, to protect himself. No, he didn't. The Pharisees had no right compromising with the Sadducees in the council.

You know what's killing our churches today? People who believe in the supernatural joining hands with those who don't believe in the supernatural. Compromising. Those who hold to the truth of the Word of God joining with those who don't hold to the truth of the Word of God.

Those who believe in the salvation by faith in Jesus Christ joining hands with those who deny that. And Paul looked at that council and said, we have a truce here. We have a compromise.

Such things ought not to be. Take your stand. Do you believe in the resurrection? Paul did.

You say, Pastor, what in the world did the resurrection have to do with Paul's grace and calmness and poise and power? I'll tell you. When you read 1 Corinthians 15, which is Paul's great treatise on the resurrection, you expect Paul to end up saying something like this. I have proved to you that Jesus arose from the dead.

And I have proved to you that we shall arise from the dead. Now, believe this truth. But he doesn't say that.

Paul did not write 1 Corinthians 15 to make theologians out of us. He wrote 1 Corinthians 15 to make better Christians out of us. Paul ends that resurrection chapter saying, therefore, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.

For as much as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. That's the way he stood that day. He was looking around and there was a man who would vote to kill him.

And there was a high priest who would vote to kill him. And Paul might be dead. Paul wasn't afraid.

You see, those people who don't know Christ as their Savior, who are not controlled by his resurrection, are afraid of life and afraid of death and afraid of time and afraid of eternity and afraid of anything that

happens. Paul wasn't afraid. Paul was steadfast and unmovable because he was possessed by the promise of a great hope.

I notice in my Bible that many people went through difficulties because they knew the future was secure. Moses. Moses went through so much.

120 years of it. Moses went through so much. What was it that kept Moses going? He endured as seeing Him that was invisible.

He gave up the pleasures of sin for a season. He was looking for a city. What kept Abraham going? That blessed hope of looking for that city.

What kept Jesus going, if I may use Him as an illustration? Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross. What kept Paul going? I know whom I have believed and am persuaded. He is able to keep that which I've committed unto Him against that day.

What day? That day of resurrection. Have I not told you about the laborers over in Ireland many years ago who were working on government roads because there was no work? And the government had hired these men just to keep them busy and give them enough to eat. One day they said to the foreman, where is this road going? And the foreman said, nowhere.

And the men lost their zest for work. Who wants to build a road to nowhere? Maybe you already are. How can you keep on going? How can you face what life brings to you unless you know where you're going? That's why Jesus sat down and put His arms around His apostles and said, let not your heart be troubled.

I go to prepare a place for you. And no matter what may happen to you down here, I'm going to see you up there. That's what keeps you going.

The power of a good conscience and the promise of a great hope. But there was a third anchor that kept Paul safe and secure and steadfast. The presence of a gracious Lord.

They came and whisked Paul away. They would have killed him. And the chief captain took him back to the barracks.

And it looked very gloomy. I keep saying to myself, where was James, the leader of the Jerusalem church? Did he not stop to visit Paul? Where were these thousands of believers that James had bragged about? Where were they? Were they praying? I read that when Peter was in prison, the church got together and spent all week and all night in prayer. I don't read that now.

My friend, there may come hours in your life when even your Christian friends don't stand with you. Paul was having one of those hours. And all night long, he waited.

And all the next day, he waited. And then the next night, while he was meditating and praying, Paul felt that Jesus was there. And verse 11 reads that the Lord Jesus Christ came into his cell and he stood by him and he spoke to him and he encouraged him.

I don't know what you're leaning on today. You say, well, I'm leaning on this person or that person. Don't do it.

I thank God for Christian friends. Thank God for people who pray and who encourage. Thank God for people who come up, grip you by the hand and say, I want you to know I'm standing with you.

But there may come an hour in your life when they won't be there. There are times when God permits us to be stripped. When it seems like even the nearest and the dearest don't understand what's going on.

And there you are in that darkness. A darkness that you can taste and feel. A darkness that smothers you like jello.

And then what are you going to do? In that dark hour, the Lord Jesus moves in and he stands with you. I want to guarantee that. If you've got that good conscience and that great hope, when your dark hour comes, Jesus comes and stands with you.

Others won't see him, but he's there. A few years before in Corinth, when Paul was fighting a battle and Paul sat down that night to write his resignation and Jesus moved in and said, don't you leave this city. I'm with you, don't be afraid.

They aren't going to hurt you. Jesus had stood with Paul before and Jesus was standing with Paul now and Jesus was going to stand with Paul again. He would be on board that ship and for 14 days tossing like a cork in a great ocean.

And men would be hanging on and wondering what was going to happen next. And Jesus was going to come and say, don't be afraid. You'll lose the cargo and you'll lose the ship, but I'm going to be with you.

Yes, when Paul got to Rome and the Roman Christians forsook him and Paul writes to Timothy and said, at my first trial, no man stood with me. No man, but the Lord stood with me. And I want you to know that in the dark hour of your life, Jesus comes and he stands with you, but that's not all.

He speaks to you. Oh, how wonderful it is when Jesus Christ comes and speaks to you. And the first words that came from his lips, be of good courage.

We translate it, be of good cheer, but the word doesn't mean cheer up. Be courageous, Paul, be of good courage. I'm with you.

He speaks to him. Do you ever go through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and make a list of the people to whom Jesus said, be of good courage, be of good courage. Somebody here today is about to quit.

Life has gotten to be too much for you. It hasn't worked out the way you planned. The devil says, quit, give up.

And Jesus comes and says, be of good courage. That's the way he talked to his disciples on that stormy sea of Galilee. When he came walking along on the water, they said, it's a spirit.

He said, be of good courage. It's I. That's the way he spoke to them in the upper room. Their world had fallen apart.

And he came and said, look, be of good courage. I've overcome the world. He spoke to him and said the word of courage and the word of commendation.

He said, look, you've testified for me here in Jerusalem. He commended Paul. James didn't come and say, Paul, thank you for the good job you're doing.

The Christians didn't come and say, oh, we're so grateful for what you did. If you wait for men to commend you, you may wait a long time. If you live for the commendation of men, you'll be disappointed.

But if you live to please the Lord Jesus, there will come that day when he'll walk up to you and say, you're doing a good job. You've testified for me at Jerusalem. He gave him the word of courage and the word of commendation and the word of confidence.

He said, you're going to get to testify for me at Rome. And Paul just relaxed. Paul wanted to go to Rome.

Jesus wanted him to go to Rome. That was his destination. That was his ministry.

Paul said, am I ever going to get to Rome? Jesus said, you'll make it. There'll be some delays. There'll be some disappointments.

There'll be some dangers. But you'll make it. Oh, my friend, life is made up of delays.

He waited for two years before he even started for Rome. Some of us can't stand to wait 10 minutes for a bus. And life is made up of delays and disappointments and dangers and difficulties.

But I want you to know that life is made up of the providential leading of God. And God ruled and overruled. They tried to kill Paul the next day and God stopped it.

They tried to drown Paul and God overruled it. When the child of God is in the will of God, everything works for him. And Paul made it to Rome.

And you know, my friend, you're going to make it. You're going to make it. Oh, but you say, pastor, I've got to go through this surgery.

You'll make it. He's with you. I've got this job problem.

You'll make it. His plan is not wrong. His map is not wrong.

He knows where he wants you and he's going to get you there. Paul wrote to the Philippians, knowing this, that he that hath begun the good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. And John wrote from that lonely isle of Patmos, he's the alpha and he's the omega.

He's the beginning and he's the end. And I'm not afraid. And so when you come to the stormy hour of life, when everything seems so impossible, what are the anchors that are going to keep you? Paul had three of them.

The power of a good conscience and the promise of a great hope and the presence of a gracious Lord. And if you belong to Jesus Christ and you have a good conscience and you're believing his blessed word, you can stand. And so my last word to you is the word of Paul.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. For as much as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. Heavenly Father, I pray for those here today who do not know our Savior.

Oh, that they might come to trust him. That they too might have that blessed presence of the Lord Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, a good conscience, a blessed hope. Oh, God, may there be those today who will trust him.

And Father, I pray for those of your people who are going through the waters, going through the fire where the burdens seem unbearable and the decisions seem impossible. Oh, God, help us all to be steadfast. Unmovable.

Lord, cleanse the conscience. Forgive us for sin when we've sinned not only against ourselves and others, but against thee. Cleanse us, oh God.

Refresh us again with the blessed hope and draw near to us. That your presence might help us. Lord, deliver us from being sanctified sissies who run at every battle.

Help us to be strong soldiers, soldiers of the cross. For we pray in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

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