

HOW TO LIVE BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

I receive a magazine called *Mission USSR* which contains the stories of Soviet Christian prisoners. One of the stories this month is "Surviving the 'Valley of Death,'" the testimony of Valentina who was arrested at the age of 28 for transporting Christian Literature within the Soviet Union. After awaiting trial for six months, she was assigned an atheist public defender. Valentina knew this would not work for their philosophies clashed violently. She realized at her trial that the judge and his assistants were prejudiced against her, and it was clear that the case was being directed by someone behind the scenes. She was finally sentenced to five years imprisonment beginning January 28, 1982.

After her trial, she was transported to a Siberian camp called the "valley of death" by the prisoners because of the high mortality rate and spread of tuberculosis. She was completely cut off from her physical and spiritual families and all the things familiar to her. Without the comfort of her Bible and surrounded by prisoners spying on and cursing each other, she said, "There were periods when it seemed I couldn't pray, that the heavens were sealed up and silent."

That is what I call living between a rock and a hard place. Valentina was separated from all that brings joy to the heart and soul. Being cut off from her family, friends and fellowship, she was cast into the very "valley of death" surrounded by the spiritually dead. There she discovered her soul had no desire to pray. At this point, the believer feels cut off from the Lord Jesus Christ, our only source of life. I am sure most of us have experienced this ourselves from time to time.

As believers, how are we to live between a rock and a hard place--a place where there appears to be no hope from heaven or earth? This is the subject I want to address. Many of us have been there, are there, and shall be there in the days ahead. That is what life is about on this earth.

In Acts 23:11-35, we will continue our study in the life of the apostle Paul of whom our Risen Lord said, "A chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name sake." In studying the life of Paul, as in the study of all the men and women of Scripture, we can glean spiritual principles that will strengthen us in the most difficult of times, the seasons of suffering between a rock and a hard place. Not only will we be strengthened in our own lives, but we will also be able to strengthen others as well.

Before we look at the passage, let us set the stage by putting it in context. The year was 57 A.D. Paul was at the end of his third missionary journey. He had gone through all the churches in Greece to collect funds for the "Jewish Famine Relief Fund" which he planned on delivering himself in Jerusalem. He also wanted to go in order to share the gospel with the Jews one more time during the celebration of Pentecost.

When he arrived, he met with James and the elders and then proceeded to the temple area in order to dispel rumors that he was against the Jews and the law. He went with four brothers to participate in purification rites. While there, some Ephesian Jews who had rejected his message about Jesus being the Jewish Messiah spotted him. They grabbed him and knocked him to the ground. They gathered thousands of Jews around them, and said, "This is the man who is against the Law of Moses and the Temple. He proclaims Jesus as the Christ. This man has even taken a Greek beyond the 'Dividing Wall' within the temple. That calls for his death!"

They would have killed him there on the spot were it not for the Romans. Knowing the nature of the Jews, the Romans had built a garrison on the grounds near the temple. From there, they saw the riot, ran down the steps, and rescued Paul. As he was being lead back up the steps overlooking the temple grounds, Paul asked permission to speak and gave his testimony to the angry crowd. He also spoke of Christ's resurrection and

Messiahship. This caused another riot! The Romans grabbed him and took him inside in order to save his life. There they discovered he was a Roman Citizen.

Finally The Roman Colonel Claudius Lysias took Paul to the Jewish Supreme Court and placed him before the High Priest, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He asked them to solve his dilemma. Again Paul stepped up and for the third time took the opportunity to share about Jesus Christ and said, "Am I on trial today for speaking about our hope and the resurrection from the dead?" As soon as he spoke these words, another riot broke out because the Sadducees and Pharisees held opposite views on the resurrection. The Sadducees did not believe in it and the Pharisees did. Claudius again had to rescue Paul and take him back to the Rome barracks.

Here we find Paul between a rock and a hard place--alone and without his Christian friends. He was discouraged over the Jewish response to his good news about the Messiah. He was in between a rock, the protective custody of the Romans, and a hard place, the murderous intent of the Ephesian Jews, as well as that of the Supreme Court. At this point, we will be encouraged to see through Paul's adventures in the age of the Spirit how we can live between a rock and a hard place.

I. Take courage in the protection of the Risen Lord, Acts 23:11-22

But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also." And when it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. And there was more than forty who formed this plot. And they came to the chief priests and the elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to take nothing until we have killed Paul. Now, therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near the place."

But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. And Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him." So he took him and led him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you." And the commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, began to inquire of him privately, "What is it that you have to report to me?" And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the council, as though you were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you." Therefore the commander let the young man go, instructing him, "Tell no one that you have notified me of these things."

1. Take courage: Jesus is our Risen Lord

First, we want to look at verse 11. Luke says that on the night immediately following all this pressure, the Lord stood at Paul's side and said, "Take courage." Why was Paul to take courage?

Jesus Christ is alive and present! Jesus Christ is aware of who you are and where you are and what is going on. This is the same Lord Jesus Christ who in his resurrection gave the disciples the Great Commission of Matthew 28 and added, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." He is next to us, inside of us, and around us! This is why he could tell Paul to take courage. This was the fourth time in the book of Acts that the Lord shows up for Paul during a time of hardship and discouragement. Paul was defeated and helpless, sensing his ministry was over as he sat in the chains of Rome.

Why can we take courage? Jesus is our source of encouragement. One of the most exciting aspects of the Lord's ministry to his disciples in every generation is the foundational truth that he is our consistent source of encouragement in the midst of life's most difficult experiences.

Remember the story of the paralytic whose life had been so filled with sin, shame and guilt that it had caused him to be in a state of spiritual and physical helplessness and hopelessness. Seeing him in the midst of this rock and a hard place, his friends took him to Jesus who had come to Capernaum. They carried him on a stretcher to the house where Jesus was staying. Because of the crowds, they went up on the roof, cut open a hole and lowered him down before Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, "Take courage, my son, your sins are forgiven." Take courage! Because Jesus is the only one who can forgive sin.

I love the story of the disciples crossing the Lake of Galilee. A great storm came up and battered them all night so that by morning they were in peril of their lives. Just as they realized they were between a rock and a hard place, who should be walking by on top of the waves? None other than Jesus himself! When the disciples saw him, they thought they were looking at a ghost and cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I. Do not be afraid." Take courage! Because Jesus is the only one who can calm the sea.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus said to his disciples, "In this world you have tribulation, but take courage. I have overcome the world." Take courage! Because Jesus is the only one who has overcome the world system.

Jesus is telling Paul, "I understand who you are and what you have been doing. Take courage. I know you have been faithfully witnessing in Jerusalem. You have witnessed in word and deed by going to the temple. I am with you and I see it." Paul was faithfully witnessing to his Lordship and to his being the Appointed One. Yet Paul never experienced one conversion in all of that witnessing. We are responsible to witness everywhere we go, every chance we get, every person we meet. But the results are not the issue. The issue is that we are to be witnesses. We cannot save anyone. Jesus is the only Savior. The commandment in Acts 1:8 is: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be of Me Witnesses." The issue is that we are to have a life style of witnessing--only the Lord is able to save anyone.

Jesus tells Paul he will be a witness in Rome as he was in Jerusalem--in chains. He says, "You will be held captive, but I will bring an audience to you." Not only are we to take courage in the fact that Jesus is alive, we are to take courage in the reality that Jesus is our protection in the most amazing ways.

2. Take courage: Jesus is our protection

Verse 16 says, "But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush..." The Jews had taken a vow to neither eat or drink until they had killed Paul. Paul not only faced the pressure of the Romans and the pressure of the supreme court, now he had the pressure of some forty zealots who wanted to kill him. Then there is verse 16.

First, Paul is to take courage because Jesus is aware of evil men. Second, Jesus provides the but's in living. God is in charge! This happens again and again throughout Scripture. But--what a wonderful word when placed in the hands of Jesus Christ! How many times in the Scripture have you read of God's wonderful but's that appear in the midst of the rocks and hard places?

Look at Joseph in prison in Egypt. He was there because his jealous brothers had sold him into slavery, but he ended up being the vice president of Egypt in charge of the grain bins in preparation for the coming seven-year famine. How did he get there? Joseph tells how he got there in Genesis 15:18-20. When his brothers found out who he was, he replied, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place. And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result to preserve many people alive."

Paul writes about the prisoner Jesus in Acts 13:28-30: "And when they found no grounds for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. And when they had carried out all that was written concerning Him they took Him down from the Cross and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead."

Peter was arrested and faced imminent execution. King Agrippa had just killed James the brother of John. Peter was next in line. Agrippa was going to make the Jews happy by killing him. While in prison, the apostle was surrounded by four squads of soldiers. There was no chance for escape. But prayer for him was fervently being offered by the church of God, and an angel of the Lord was sent to free him.

We too were prisoners once. Ephesians 2:1-4 says, "We were dead in our trespasses and sins...But God, being rich, because of his great love with which He loved us,...made us alive in Christ..."

"But the son of Paul's sister..."--I looked everywhere for references to Paul's sister and his nephew. There is no mention of them anywhere. They were set on the side of history all of Paul's life so that they would be in the right place at the right time, when Paul was between a rock and a hard place. God said, "Nephew, it is time to go on stage. Get out there!" That is incredible!

We have to live with that reality. That is possible because Jesus Christ is alive and he is in charge of history. It is his story! When he writes a story, no matter how difficult the plot appears, he just says it is time and moves in with a but. He could use an angel, a brother, an earthquake, or a fish. The rock and the hard place dissolves--spiritually guaranteed! Emotionally we may still suffer and physically the hard place may still be there, but spiritually we will be freed.

Remember our Soviet sister Valentina who was in "the valley of death." Talk about a rock and hard place! She went on to say:

The conditions in camp were disheartening...I had prayed before being sent there that wherever God sent me, He would give me the strength to fulfill the work quota. At first, things were very hard physically, of course, but [italics mine] God preserved me in His mercy, through the prayers of my friends and the church. Sometimes I didn't even have the strength to pray, but could only raise my eyes to heaven in a silent cry. In His mercy the Lord sent me a Christian sister...Natasha...a wonderful Christian, of sterling character, full of peace, and it was evident that the Lord was present with her. We always tried to support one another in the arms of prayer.

What a testimony of God's presence, encouragement and protection!

How do we live between a rock and a hard place? We take courage in the protection of the risen Lord. There is a second reason for our courage.

II. Take courage in the provision of the Risen Lord, 23:23-35

And he called to him two of the centurions, and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen." They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor. And he wrote a letter having this form:

"Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felis, greetings.

When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came upon them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. And when I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you."

So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks. And when these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. And when he had read it, he asked from what province he was; and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, he said, "I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also," giving orders for him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.

Once the murderous plot was uncovered, the risen Lord cranked up the Roman Empire to provide transportation and protection for the new Chairman of his Evangelism Committee dedicated to spreading of the gospel among the Gentiles, Kings and Jews within the Roman Empire. The Romans provided an abundance of free body guards. There were 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen--470 men assigned to protect Paul. Even if you attacked the group, you probably would not have been able to find Paul among them! The Romans also provided free transportation. Paul was given two or more horses for the sixty-mile journey. And they provided a letter of introduction to Felix, the Roman Governor of Caesarea.

The Lord even provided a wonderful hotel room--Herod's personal quarters. G. Campbell Morgan says, "The Palace of Herod was used by the Lord as a safe place for His Servant. It was a prison, but a prison is a palace when the Lord provides it for his servant Paul." If you ever go to Caesarea, you can see the ruins where Paul was imprisoned.

Valentina our Soviet prisoner stayed in the "valley of death" for the full five years. She was finally released in 1987 at the age of 32. When she was asked, "Don't you regret the years that you wasted here?" she answered,

If the Son of God willingly went to Calvary for me, what in comparison is giving five years of my earthly life?...The ministry He gave me in the prison camp was the work He wanted me to do. He put me there and required only that I be faithful to Him....He gave me the health and strength to remain faithful to Him. And through His mercy and power through the prayers of His people, He enabled me to be victorious.

Jesus is alive! And Jesus, our Risen Lord, is at work, regardless of where we are. For those of you who are at this moment between a rock and a hard place, when it seems that the heavens are brass and that you have been forsaken by your family and friends, you need to remember that the Risen Lord is invisible but present. Take courage for he will protect and provide in the midst of the pressure. In time, we will have the blessing of experiencing in the midst of the spiritual, emotional and physical pressure the "but's" of God. Then we will be able to encourage others when they find themselves in the same place. We will be able to say, "Yes, that happened to me too, but do you know what our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus did? Be encouraged! Not only did he protect me, he also provided for me. All this is possible because he is alive!"

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