

Main Idea: If we do the Lord’s work, there will be times when we must stand alone. That’s true for us today as it was for Paul in Acts 22:30-23:11. There are two certainties that we must grasp if we are going to stand alone in the face of conflict.

- I. At times we must stand alone (22:30-23:10).
  - A. Paul was accused (30).
  - B. Paul was attacked (1-5).
    1. Our tendency is to be defensive (1-3).
    2. Our need is to respond biblically (4-5).
  - C. Paul was able to raise the real issue (6-10).
    1. He knew people (6a).
    2. He knew what he believed (6b).
    3. He knew that what others believe determines how they behave (7-10).
- II. When we stand alone, we are never really alone (23:11).
  - A. We have the Lord’s presence.
  - B. We have the Lord’s Word.
  - C. We have the Lord’s plan.
    1. The purpose of my life isn’t about me.
    2. The purpose of my life is about Him.

The importance of remembering: Words to remember when we feel alone ...

1. Remember Mark 15:34.
2. Remember the One who truly was all alone.
3. Remember that He was alone so that we might never be alone again.

Why is there such hostility towards the gospel of Jesus Christ, and what’s the proper response to this hostility? God is so kind and wise, and He’s given us answers in His Word, as we’re learning in our current series in Acts. This morning’s message is entitled, “When We Must Stand Alone.”

*Scripture Reading: Acts 22:30-23:11*

During his years as premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by a shout from a heckler in the audience. "You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?"

"Who said that?" roared Khrushchev. An agonizing silence followed as nobody in the room dared move a muscle. Then Khrushchev replied quietly, "Now you know why."<sup>2</sup>

Have you ever been in a situation where you were the only Christian in a room? Maybe you were in a biology class at a secular university and the professor was ridiculing those who hold to creationism. Or perhaps you walked into a heated discussion in the break-room at work, the subject being the “narrow-mindedness of fundamental Christians.” Possibly it was the locker room at school and you were the only one not laughing at the off-colored jokes.

It’s tough to stand alone, isn’t it? The Bible is full of accounts of people who were willing to stand alone for God. **Noah** stood alone and built the ark, enduring the world’s mocking for year after year. **Joseph** stood alone when Potiphar’s wife framed him and sent him to prison. **Moses** stood alone as he led the fickle Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. **David** stood alone as he faced Goliath. **Daniel** stood alone in the lion’s den.

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For a previous look at this passage, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Today in the Word*, July 13, 1993.

**Jeremiah** stood alone when his own people cast him into a cistern. **Stephen** stood alone when the Jews tried him and stoned him. The apostle **John** stood alone when the Romans boiled him in a cauldron of oil and exiled him on the island of Patmos.

In addition to the biblical record, church history is full of stories of men and women who stood alone for the Lord Jesus. **John Wycliffe** stood alone while critics attacked him for translating the Bible into the English language so common people could read it. **Martin Luther** stood alone when the Roman Catholic authorities told him to recant of his allegiance to his biblical convictions. **John Huss** stood alone and was burned at the stake at the age of 42 and died singing, “Lord, have mercy.” **Hudson Taylor** stood alone when his peers mocked his unorthodox methods for reaching the Chinese for Christ. I remember hearing a message by **Georgi Vins**, who stood alone and was thrown by the communists into a horrible Soviet prison for preaching the gospel.

Perhaps you’re thinking, “Hold on. I’m not John Huss, and I’m certainly not Daniel or Noah. To be honest, I’d rather just get along with people, even if it means toning down my faith a little.”

But of course, toning down our faith is not an option. We either believe that Jesus Christ is the Savior and Lord, or we don’t. And if we do believe that He is, then we must say it, and live in light of it, and at times *stand alone* because of it.

“Okay,” you say, “I’m willing, but I’m not sure I can. I’m a weak person! How can I stand for Christ when everyone else is against Him?”

What the Lord has to say to us today from His Word will help us. In today’s text we’re going to see the vivid example of Paul himself, who was willing to stand alone, not once, but time and time again in his life.

We are in Acts 22:30-23:11, and this is one of those occasions when Paul stood alone. In this text we’re going to see two certainties that we must grasp if we are going to stand alone in the face of conflict.

### I. At times we must stand alone (22:30-23:10).

Not maybe, but *must*. This subject is not optional. This is a General Ed course for Christian living, “Standing Alone 101.” If you are a Christian, a *biblical* Christian, there will be times when you must stand alone.

Unfortunately, we don’t talk about that enough. We’d rather emphasize what we *get* for being a Christian, rather than what it *costs* to be a Christian.

Please don’t misunderstand me. We pay nothing to become a Christian, and if we think we can pay something to merit God’s favor, we’re likely not a Christian! To be saved we must admit we are lost, helplessly and hopelessly lost in our sins. We must bring our spiritually bankrupt lives to God, acknowledge that we deserve His judgment, and can do nothing to prevent it. Then and only then are we able to receive what He freely offers us, His forgiveness and acceptance, on the basis of the work His Son accomplished for us at the cross and the empty tomb.

God says that whoever believes in His Son receives the gift of eternal life. Salvation is a gift. It’s free to us. My non-Christian friend, though you are poverty-stricken you can be saved today because *Jesus paid it all*. Salvation is free.

But it’s not cheap. If you receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord you will become a minority in this world. You will be hated by the religious crowd and mocked by the irreligious, just as your Savior was. And there will be times when you must, as did your Savior, *stand alone*.

Jesus said in John 15:20, “Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

And when it comes to standing alone, Paul can show us how. As we concluded last time Paul was standing on the top step in the Jerusalem temple. A misunderstanding had led to his arrest, so he asked the Roman tribune, Claudius Lysias, for permission to speak to the angry mob of Jews. Speaking in Hebrew (or Aramaic, the heart language of the Jews), he shared his testimony of salvation with them and seemed to gain some ground. Until, that is, he revealed that God had sent him to take the message of the Messiah to the Gentiles. Upon hearing the word “Gentiles,” the Jewish crowd went wild.

So the commander took Paul into the Fortress of Antonia, prepared to scourge his criminal, and then discovered that Paul was a Roman citizen.

Our story focuses on the event that occurred the very next day. Three things happened to the apostle.

**A. Paul was accused (30).** “But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them (ESV).”

Claudius Lysias still didn’t know what Paul’s crime was. He’d heard plenty of wild accusations, but none of them made sense to him. So he decided to address the problem head-on. He ordered the Jewish Sanhedrin to assemble for a special session to examine Paul.

The Sanhedrin was the ruling body of the Jews, the Jewish “supreme court,” and consisted of seventy to one hundred men (71 being the proper number). Keep in mind that in his pre-Christian days Paul (then Saul) used to hang out with this crowd, and was there when the Sanhedrin passed the death sentence on Stephen.

But now the tables are turned. Now he’s under the microscope for examination. They are *accusing* him, and he’s *standing* before them. In the next scene it moved beyond mere accusation.

**B. Paul was attacked (1-5).** Here’s how it happened.

Verse 1 begins, “And looking intently at the council, Paul said.” In the NIV, “Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin.” The verb is the same one Luke used in Acts 1 for the disciples’ gazing into the sky as the Lord ascended. The Greek *atenizo* means “to gaze upon, to fix one’s eyes upon, to stare.”

Some say this was due to Paul’s poor eyesight. I don’t think so. I think his mind flooded with memories. Two decades earlier, he hung out with these men. Perhaps he’s looking to see who is still around, who he recognizes.

His gaze did something else that day. It delivered a wordless message. Our eyes always do. As the Sanhedrin members made eye contact with Paul that day, they saw conviction mixed with compassion. They were looking at the man who just months earlier (in AD 57) penned these words in Romans 9:1-3, “I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race.”

Finally, Paul broke the silence and spoke, saying in verse 1, “Brothers” (NIV, “My brothers”). Interesting introduction. The customary way of addressing such a group was, “Rulers and elders of the people” (as Peter did in Acts 4:8), or “Brothers and fathers” (as Stephen did in Acts 7:2). But Paul addressed this solemn assembly with a tone of familiarity, “My brothers,” since he knew some of them and considered himself an equal.

He continued, “I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.” In the NIV, “I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.” Remember, he’s standing there to defend himself against their accusations. His first line of defense is one of conscience. “My conscience is clear.”

Keep in mind that a person's conscience can be clear and yet misguided (as Paul's was when he persecuted Christians). If your conscience isn't shaped by God's Word, you can feel guilt-free and still guilty. The world is full of people who are convinced they are going to heaven because of their own goodness. Their conscience is clear, yes, but it's clear because it's misinformed.

Paul's conscience was clear, he said, because he had sought to please God and not man. That had been true even in the days prior to his conversion. He wasn't perfect, but he had a pure conscience.

I'm not sure where Paul planned to go next with this line of defense, but he never got there. Luke tells us why in verse 2, "And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth."

Why Ananias responded this way we're not told. History verifies he was an egocentric, dictatorial type of ruler. He reigned as high priest for about eleven years, starting in AD 47, and was one of the most corrupt high priests the Jews ever had. Josephus says Ananias stole tithes that should have gone to the common priests. Just five years before the event we're considering, the governor of Syria sent Ananias to Rome on suspicion of complicity in an outbreak between the Jews and Samaritans, but he retained his office. He was very wealthy. His pro-Roman policy also made him very hated by his own people, so much so that in AD 66 some Jewish insurgents drug him to his death.<sup>3</sup>

He's the one who gave the order to strike Paul on the mouth. And how did Paul respond to this attack? The same way most of us would when mistreated.

1. *Our tendency is to be defensive (1-3)*. The fact is, Ananias actually broke Jewish law in authorizing his men to strike Paul on the mouth. Apparently, Paul knew it, and responded in a flash with a verbal jab.

In verse 3, "Then Paul said to him, 'God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?'"

It reminds me of Jesus' response in Matthew 23:27, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness."

The Jews painted their tombs white to warn people not to touch them and thereby defile themselves. By use of this word picture, Paul was saying that Ananias may have looked impressive to outward appearance, but was full of deadness and decay on the inside.

You have to admire Paul's courage. The man was not intimidated one iota by this austere crowd.

As the story goes, when Abraham Lincoln prepared to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, he took his pen, moved it to the signature line, paused for a moment, and then dropped the pen. When asked why, the president replied, "If my name goes into history, it will be for this act, and if my hand trembles when I sign it, there will be some who will say, 'he hesitated.'" Lincoln then turned to the table, took up the pen, and boldly signed his name.<sup>4</sup>

Lincoln was a tremendous president, in part, because he wasn't afraid to stand alone. And yet, sometimes boldness can go too far. Such was the case with Paul, as he himself will admit momentarily.

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<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, p. 450.

<sup>4</sup> *Today in the Word*, July, 1990, p. 8.

It's hard to assess what happened next. It seems as though, instead of responding, Paul *reacted*. He seems to momentarily lose his cool, unlike Jesus who, "when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23)." While it's true that Jesus once called wicked King Herod a "fox," it's also true that when he was struck at His trial, He took it silently.

I love how the Bible tells it like it is. It doesn't hide the flaws of God's people. It records David's adultery, Jonah's pouting, Peter's denial, and then shows how that when "sin abounds, grace does much more abound."

We see it again right here in Acts 23. When attacked, Paul seems to do what I tend to do, what we *all* tend to do. To become defensive. As my pastor-friend, Tim, puts it. "Unfortunately, at times I'd rather be right than righteous."

So what should we do when attacked?

2. *Our need is to respond biblically (4-5)*. "Those who stood by said, 'Would you revile God's high priest?'<sup>5</sup> And Paul said, 'I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.''"

We don't have an audio recording of Paul's response, but my hunch is he changed his tone, dropped the volume, and spoke humbly to those who had just heard his wrath. This bold and courageous soldier is willing to heed correction, when needed.

He quotes from Exodus 22:28 which says in the ESV, "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people." In the CSB it says, "You must not...curse a leader among your people."

But when quoting, Paul broadens the translation, "You shall not *speak evil* of a ruler of your people (ESV)." The NIV and KJV also translate the verb, "speak evil." We're not to do that, admits Paul. We're not to speak evil of our ruler.

That's an interesting admission. Although Ananias was a self-seeking leader who had mistreated Paul (as he had many other people), Paul acknowledges that this didn't give him the right to respond wrongly in return.

There's a vital lesson here for us. There will be many times in life when people will wrong us, but that never justifies a wrong response from us.

Suppose our boss takes advantage of us. Our tendency will be to undermine his authority. Suppose we have a parent who says hurtful things to us. Our natural reaction will be to become spiteful. Suppose our government leaders use our tax dollars to fund projects that violate our convictions. If we follow our natural inclination, we'll find it quite easy to mock them in casual conversation.

But God's Word says, "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people." That's the verse Paul quotes in this tense moment. It's not because people in positions of authority are always right. And it's not that there won't be times when proper objection is necessary. Yet because God has established human authority, whether it's parental or governmental or whatever authority, God expects us to speak respectfully to and about those authorities. Indeed, He put them in place (see Romans 13:1). And He will hold them responsible for how they lead. He will also hold us responsible for how we responded to their leadership. That's true of how we respond to all kinds of authority figures—presidents, church elders, teachers, coaches, and more.

A few years later Paul himself elaborates on the subject in Titus 3:1-2, "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men." Christians should have a positive reputation when it comes to authority.

Paul could easily have rationalized, “Not only is this Ananias a bad leader, he’s not even my leader. We don’t need a human high priest any more. We have Jesus. Besides, this guy is part of the very system that killed Jesus. He doesn’t deserve my respect.”

But even if the man didn’t deserve it, his God-given position did. So Paul gave it.

Some have raised the question, “Why did Paul say he didn’t realize Ananias was the high priest? How could he not have known he was the ruler?” They say Paul was being sarcastic here, in essence saying, “The way this guy is behaving I didn’t know he was the high priest!”

Others say (and I agree) that Paul was sincere. We do know this was a special session and not a regular meeting of the Sanhedrin, so it’s possible the high priest wasn’t wearing his official robe or sitting in his customary seat. We also know that Paul hadn’t spent much time in Jerusalem for over two decades, and in an age before pictures in the news, he probably didn’t know what Ananias looked like.

Most of us tend to be defensive. We can be wrong and know we’re wrong, but we struggle to admit it. But Paul shows us the better way. He took responsibility for his actions, because he didn’t want anything he did to distract from what matters most.

Which brings us to scene 3. Paul was accused, then attacked. Thirdly...

**C. Paul was able to raise the real issue (6-10).** In verse 6 Paul decided it was time to change the direction this court hearing was heading. Here’s how he did it.

“Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, ‘Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.’”

What’s Paul doing? To use a football analogy, he’s moving from defense to offense. He’s raising the real issue and putting it on the table. He could do that because he knew three things.

1. *He knew people (6a).* Luke specifically says, “Now when Paul *perceived*.” The NIV says, “Then Paul, *knowing* that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees.” Paul knew his audience.

Years ago, a large statue of Christ was erected high in the Andes on the border between Argentina and Chile. Called “Christ of the Andes,” the statue symbolizes a pledge between the two countries that as long as the statue stands, there will be peace between Chile and Argentina. Shortly after the statue was erected, the Chileans began to protest that they had been slighted -- the statue had its back turned to Chile. Just when tempers were at their highest in Chile, a Chilean newspaperman saved the day. In an editorial that not only satisfied the people but made them laugh, he simply said, “The people of Argentina need more watching over than the Chileans.”<sup>5</sup>

There’s a fellow that knew how to read people. If we’re going to minister with people, we must know people.

Lee Iacocca was the long-time president of Ford Motor Company until he was fired, and then recruited by Chrysler to salvage it from its decline. Here was Lee Iacocca’s perspective on people skills:

Now, there’s one phrase that I hate to see on any executive’s evaluation, no matter how talented he may be, and that’s the line: ‘He has trouble getting along with people.’ To me, that’s the kiss of death. ‘You’ve just destroyed the guy,’ I always think. ‘He can’t get along with people? Then he’s got a real problem, because that’s all we’ve got around here. No dogs, no apes—only people. And if he can’t get along with his peers, what good is he to the company? As an

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<sup>5</sup> *Bits & Pieces*, June 25, 1992.

executive, his whole function is to motivate other people. If he can't do that, he's in the wrong place.'<sup>6</sup>

Iacocca's insight is food for thought for us. If a member of WBC has trouble getting along with people, he is in serious danger, and so is the church. The reason is obvious, to paraphrase Iacocca: "If a member of WBC can't get along with people, he's got a real problem, because that's all we've got around here. No dogs, no apes—only people."

Paul knew people. He knew something else.

2. *He knew what he believed (6b, NIV)*. "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead."

Why did Paul say that? Was he simply playing politics? No. I find it hard to believe that the man who was just about killed the previous day by a mob would now play politics to save his neck. He's not afraid to die. Why then?

I think it's because he knew he wasn't going to get a fair hearing that day, and before it ended, he wanted to make sure he put the main issue on the table, as he did every time he was with people. And with this simple statement, he did just that.

*I believe in the resurrection.*

Remember his critics accused him of being anti-Jewish. He wants to show that he's not anti-Jewish, and furthermore, that Christianity is not anti-Jewish, but rather is built upon the foundation of Judaism, and indeed, is the fulfillment of it.

This is the main issue. It's why Paul stood on trial that day. "I believe in the resurrection of the dead."

Paul knew what he believed. He knew something else.

3. *He knew that what others believe determines how they behave (7-10)*. Here's evidence of that (verses 7-10): "And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.<sup>8</sup> For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.<sup>9</sup> Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, 'We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?'<sup>10</sup> And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks."

Paul had a solid, biblical anthropology. In other words, he knew how the human mind works. He knew that what we believe determines how we behave.

In this case, he knew that the Sanhedrin was made up of members of two parties. The majority were Sadducees, and the minority (and a vocal one) were Pharisees. Barclay explains the basic differences, "The Pharisees believed in the minutiae of the oral Law; the Sadducees accepted only the written Law. The Pharisees believed in predestination; the Sadducees believed in free-will. The Pharisees believed in angels and spirits; the Sadducees did not. Above all, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead; the Sadducees did not."<sup>7</sup>

That final difference, the one regarding the resurrection, was the crux of the matter, and Paul knew it. "*I believe in the resurrection of the dead.*" In other words, there's more to life than this life. There is a life to come. Death was not the end for Jesus of Nazareth. Death will not be the end for us. I believe in the resurrection.

I chuckle at how the Pharisees responded. "We find nothing wrong with this man."

Nothing wrong? Moments ago, they were furious with him. Now they side with him.

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<sup>6</sup> Lee Iacocca, *Iacocca: An Autobiography*, New York: Bantam, 1984, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Barclay, p. 165.

They definitely aren't followers of Jesus yet, but they are closer to the kingdom than the rest of the bunch.

No, I don't think Paul's doing this to save his neck. He's already made it clear he's willing to die for Christ. What he's doing is moving the one potentially receptive group in the crowd a little closer to the cross. As F. F. Bruce observes, "A Sadducee could not become a Christian without abandoning the distinctive theological position of his party; a Pharisee could become a Christian and remain a Pharisee—in the early decades of Christianity, at least."<sup>8</sup>

To use Paul's own words in 1 Corinthians 9:22–23, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. <sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." That's what Paul's doing in Acts 23.

Friends, here's an important principle to keep in mind when dealing with people. Beliefs determine behavior.

Let me illustrate. If you happen to believe that this life is all there is, then you will see nothing wrong with having multiple sex partners or filling your body with intoxicating substances, for there is no coming judgment day, not if this life is all there is.

Or, if your belief system says that man is basically good and that God accepts us the way we are, then you will try to live a good life and be convinced that your good works guarantee that you're heading to heaven.

But...if you believe, as the Bible teaches, that we are born as depraved sinners and that our good works are as filthy rags to a holy God, you will see your situation quite differently. You will rightly be afraid of what's coming. And you will express your need to the Lord for His mercy and salvation. And when you hear about His gracious offer to forgive you, if you would but repent and believe in His Son, you will joyfully do just that! You will ask Him to do what you cannot do, to save you, by His grace, and for His glory!

It's true. What we believe determines how we behave. And if we believe, like Paul, that the resurrection of the dead is coming, then we too, like Paul, will be willing to stand alone, when necessary. That's certainty #1.

You say, "But I feel so weak! I'm not sure I can stand alone!" Nor can any of us, my friend. But thanks be to God for the encouragement of certainty #2.

## II. When we stand alone, we are never really alone (23:11).

And that's not double-talk. It's actually what Paul experienced in verse 11, "The following night the Lord stood by him and said, 'Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.'"

In His message to Paul the Lord revealed three realities that enable us to stand alone.

**A. We have the Lord's presence.** Luke says that *the Lord stood by* Paul. The world can stand against us, but we can make it if we know He is standing *by* us. And He is! Do remember the final words of Jesus' in the great commission? "Go, make disciples...and lo, *I am with you always* even to the end of the age (Matt 28:19-20)."

It's AD 57 in Acts 23. Paul will serve Christ for another ten years, until AD 67, when he will give his life as a martyr. Just prior to his death and while awaiting execution, Paul reflected on this very truth in 2 Timothy 4:16-17, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. *But the Lord stood at my side* and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully

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<sup>8</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 453.



proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth."

Friends, here's what enables us to stand. We have the Lord's presence.

**B. We have the Lord's Word.** Verse 11 again states, "The following night the Lord stood by him *and said.*" Oh, what a difference His Word makes! Sheep love to hear their Shepherd speak to them. And those who stand when others fall are those who base their confidence on what their Shepherd *says*, and not on what they *feel*.

Dear brothers and sisters, here again is why we must be in this Book. This is how our Shepherd speaks to us, and oh, what joy His Word imparts to the fearful soul!

**C. We have the Lord's plan.** Listen to what the Lord said 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."

This was God's plan for Paul. *As you have just done in Jerusalem, so in Rome.*

How do those words affect you? "Really, Lord? It didn't go so well in Jerusalem. And this is what I can expect in Rome?"

But this shows how limited our perspective is. The fact is, it went exactly as planned in Jerusalem, that is, *as God planned.* We're so result-oriented. If we don't see immediate results, we think the plan failed. Not Paul. While he didn't see many positive results in Jerusalem, at least not yet, he knew that the Lord had used him. He had testified to the facts about Jesus in Jerusalem, and that's precisely what the Lord had wanted him to do. You shall be witnesses unto Me.

And what you have done here, you will do *there*, in Rome. You will testify to the facts about Me, my death for sinners, and resurrection from the dead.

Beloved, God has a special plan for each of us. But to enjoy it, we must settle this.

1. *The purpose of my life isn't about me.*

2. *The purpose of my life is about Him.* And that's the key to standing alone.

In 1956 five missionaries took a risk to go make contact with the Aucas, a fierce group of Indians in South America. Their goal was to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with these people. They never returned alive. Their choice to stand up for Jesus cost them their lives.

Was it a tragic waste? No. Just a couple of weeks prior to that fateful day, one of the missionaries, Nate Saint, sat at his typewriter to tell the world why they were going—just in case. In speaking these words, he spoke for all:

As we weigh the future and seek the will of God, does it seem right that we should hazard our lives for just a few savages? As we ask ourselves this question, we realize that it is not the call of the needy thousands, rather it is the simple intimation of the prophetic Word that there shall be some from every tribe in His presence in the last day and in our hearts we feel that it is pleasing to Him that we should interest ourselves in making an opening into the Auca prison for Christ.

As we have a high old time this Christmas, may we who know Christ hear the cry of the damned as they hurtle headlong into the Christless night without ever a chance. May we be moved with compassion as our Lord was. May we shed tears of repentance for these we have failed to bring out of darkness. Beyond the smiling scenes of Bethlehem may we see the crushing agony of Golgotha. May God give us a new vision of His will concerning the lost and our responsibility.

Would that we could comprehend the lot of these stone-age people who live in mortal fear of ambush on the jungle trail...those to whom the bark of a gun means sudden, mysterious death...those who think all men in all the world are killers like themselves. If God would grant us the vision, the word sacrifice would disappear

from our lips and thoughts; we would hate the things that seem now so dear to us; our lives would suddenly be too short, we would despise time-robbing distractions and charge the enemy with all our energies in the name of Christ. May God help us to judge ourselves by the eternities that separate the Aucas from a comprehension of Christmas and Him, who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor so that we might, through His poverty, be made rich.<sup>9</sup>

The church today needs people like that, people who are sold out for Christ, people who know that, yes, at times we must stand alone. Yet when we stand alone, we are never really alone.

Today is communion Sunday. What an appropriate way to conclude this message! We've just seen in today's text that there was a time when Paul stood alone, but was never truly alone. Nor are we. And why is that? Why is it that we are never all alone?

It's because of the One who endured the agony of truly being all alone, who said, "Why have you forsaken me?"

Listen to this account of the cross in Mark 15:33–39, "And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.<sup>34</sup> And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>35</sup> And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah."<sup>36</sup> And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."<sup>37</sup> And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.<sup>38</sup> And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.<sup>39</sup> And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

Beloved, how important it is to remember. *Do this in remembrance of Me*, said our Savior. Those who stand are those who remember.

The importance of remembering: These are words to remember when we feel alone ...

Today as we come to the table, I call upon each of us to remember.

1. *Remember Mark 15:34.* Remember His cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

2. *Remember the One who truly was all alone.* And why was He all alone, forsaken on the cross? Because on that cross, He was taking our place. Indeed, on the cross, He took upon Himself the sins of every person who would ever repent and believe in Him. He took their punishment. He endured the wrath of God, the eternal loneliness of hell, in their place.

3. *Remember that He was alone so that we might never be alone again.*

To help us remember, let's sing together about what happened on that hill far away.

**Closing Song:** #186 "The Old Rugged Cross" (all four verses)

**Communion** [Pick up elements as you enter the auditorium, deacons be prepared to distribute]

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<sup>9</sup> *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, Chapter 16, "We Go Not Forth Alone," p. 176.