

Here I Stand

Acts 26:19-23

I do hope that you immediately recognize the three big little words in our sermon title today: “Here - I - Stand”. They came from the lips of a converted monk, standing surrounded by the dignitaries of Europe, and before the throne of the Holy Roman Emperor, dressed in all his pomp, Charles V. Martin Luther was on trial for his life, at the order of the Roman Catholic Pope. He was not being asked but demanded to recant his writings, which sat on a nearby table.

But in boldly refusing – in the name of God – his ‘Here I Stand’ was followed by other important words, which tie us into the backbone of Paul’s defense, on trial for the gospel. Luther said, “I can do no other! God help me. Amen.”

I have little doubt the great German Reformer drew his strength and breath from the lines before us today in Acts 26.19-23. And running through these five verses is this strong cord of necessity; a “must”; a ‘here I stand, I can do no other’.

As we saw last time, Paul had been made to stand by the grace of risen and all-glorious Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, whom he was persecuting. The Savior of the chief of sinners laid Paul low, and then stood him up – “stand for Me, now, Paul; I appoint you a minister who testifies of Me and my gospel, Me and my Kingdom; and I send you with this message of verse 18 – what is called the “Brevarium Apostolicum” – the Apostolic message in brief.

And I am sending you – in spite of all – to both the Jews and the Gentiles. Paul then must stand in declaring to all – in Damascus, at Jerusalem, in Judea, and even to the far off Gentiles now brought near – the gospel declaration. He must witness to all, small and great, to all men everywhere – what? That they should, they **must** repent; they should, they **must** turn from their sins and turn to God through Christ, and they, in turn must demonstrate that life-change by new living.

Paul must testify – he can do no other – woe be to me if I preach not the Gospel – he must do so even against fiercest opposition – not only from Gentiles who beat him, jailed him, ran him out of town, outlawed him and even stoned him – but also from his own countrymen. Jesus promised to rescue him – go into all the world and make disciples, and lo, I am with always.

There is an authoritative “must” in the Word of God. Paul does not come only by the heavenly vision: he comes by the heavenly word of the OT – he states no other than the words of the Prophets and of Moses; he does not go beyond them, but does not come short of them either. And what did they say? And here are three “musts” which actually bring us to Paul’s commission:

- The Christ **must** suffer – other translations get this right: not would or was to, but must.
- Likewise, the Christ **must** first rise again from the dead;
- Thirdly, He **must** be first to proclaim light both to the Jew and the Gentiles, on equal footing.

Now it is this last phrase that among others greatly intrigues me. Yes the OT witnessed to the Messiah being the light of the world, the

Gentiles. For instance, consider the OT proclamation of Is. 42.6; 49.6, 60.3. Paul writes in Romans 15, quoting 4 texts from the history, the Pentateuch, the Psalms and the Prophets:

For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers,⁹ and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME."¹⁰ Again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE."¹¹ And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM."¹² Again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE." (Rom 15:8-12 NAU) 2 Sam. 22.50; Dt. 32.43; Ps. 117.1; Is. 11.10

How did the Messiah do this? Paul insists He would be the first to proclaim to them these things. Did he not travel to Cyprus, Galatia, Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus? But recall how this book begins in Acts 1.1-2. Jesus continued to do and to teach.

This brings us to the first of three brief points today: **The Powerful Apologetic**. Given this vision, this commission, how could I be disobedient, King Agrippa? Wouldn't you do the same?

Jesus more than sends him forth; He goes with His servant, His testifier. The very help of God is his to stand, in this most important work that the earth has ever seen! How could I disobey? Given the glory of the One who commanded me? Who saved me? Who gave me the message of life, not to the Jew only, but also to the Greek? To the Romans, Paul insisted he was a debtor to all; he was eager to preach

the gospel to all. He could say, woe is me if I preach not the gospel, given all these elements.

What Paul sought to get across to Agrippa and the rest, says Calvin, was that he had God for his author of all those things which the Jews condemned as sacrilege. This is the must of Paul's stand; which forms the backbone of the powerful apologetic.

God working in Paul was akin to God working in Peter toward the Jews - ⁷ *But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised* ⁸ *(for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles),* ⁹ *and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Gal 2:7-9 NAU)*

The "I stand" of v. 22 is in the pft. – rendered by Barrett as "I have taken my stand and here I am" This is by the very help of God. Help is emphatic; should be 'help I obtained, the one from God'.

This is the model for every Christian, although Paul's apostleship stands unique. As he says elsewhere: God worked in me and I worked. The powerful help of God to the believer. Our God makes us weak believers to stand.

He makes us stand at first; makes us to persevere in that stand; makes us to stand, not in just one or two chosen and acceptable arenas, but in all. How? Aren't we weak sinners? With men, this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.

This should bring us to the second point: **the Powerful Imperative:** the change that takes place in the gospel message – the must of v. 20b;

men should, they must repent – this is framed not merely as an invitation, but an imperative. And three items are pivotal – repentance, faith, good works.

Isn't this the same message as John the Baptist in Mt. 3.8 – bring forth fruits meet for repentance? Repentance is a missing feature of today's gospel, is it not? Americans want a God who will accept them the way they are; they want God to approve of them without change, just love them the way they are, without Christ, or Grace, or a new heart, or forgiveness, or a holy life.

What the Bible presents is a God who will accept no one who is a sinner – period! See Shorter Catechism 82: *Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God? A. No mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed. (WSC 1:82 WCS)*

But here is this remedy – repent! Turn from your sins unto the Lord. This is the mark of a believer. John MacArthur draws attention to Russian believers, who have one simple question – have you repented?! They would never use our terminology – have you accepted Jesus, or have you asked Jesus into your heart, but have you fruit? We must never leave repentance out of our definition of true Christianity; keep the turning to God, but beef up the turning from sin and the change of good living which is consistent with true, genuine repentance.

Then there is this insistence upon good works; no true faith except that you have a true and changed life to match. This is a remarkable thing, given that Paul insists again and again and again, that it is by faith alone apart from works that we are justified, accepted in the beloved,

and forgiven. Lang says: “None more firmly than Paul rejected works, before or after conversion as a ground of salvation; none more firmly demanded good works as a consequence of salvation.”

This is the Powerful Imperative – it demands this change, not merely inviting men to turn or burn, but that they must, or else. It is a sin to not believe the Gospel; to not turn from your ways to Christ’s; to not be filled with good works. Our Jesus commands all men – everywhere – to repent. And as you see, this is a universal command, for all time, as long as time lasts.

See how this is not only to the Jews, and thus not to the Gentiles unless they first become Jews. This is not only to the great to the exclusion of the small; the rich over the poor; the powerful over the weak and disenfranchised; the white over the black; the males before the females; the moralistic over the immoral – the irreligious, the pagan, the barbarian, the sexually sinful.

Paul was opposed by the Jews – not only because he was expanding the freedoms of the true faith of the OT to the Greeks and barbarians; but because they were Greeks and barbarians. What a weak little god, a god of their own making, not the God of the OT, they served. But so does all flesh bow to such lowly altars – to a god which can be manipulated, made to serve us, fit in with our plans, and who does not command repentance, or faith. Man is sovereign and not God, is the confession of so many.

But this nicely transitions to our last point: the **Powerful Testimony**. Paul does not merely say, here I stand, but here I stand testifying. He was called a servant to testify.

See here – to testify is not the same as to teach. This is a declaration of the King’s terms! This is the Lord’s Will or Deed being declared.

The Apostle to the Gentiles does not come to sinful men to do a bargain. Why? Because His terms are already a bargain! They are the most gracious terms, which brings you into the most glorious estate. What is presented is not a hope so, or a maybe – ‘try Christ, He might help you’ – No, He will help you, but you are to come to him.

Christianity is more to testify than to teach, says Calvin. It is not a list of maybes and hope-so’s that you are invited to, with others, to sift through, to decide what you like or don’t like. The fact that we begin with a solemn call to repent, should awaken us from that kind of day-dream. Salvation is not merely offered; it is declared as a done deal, and you are commanded to be saved. All need to be – great and small.

This is his will, his terms, we might say, His covenant drawn up for you. He calls you to turn from your ways and turn to His – sign it – it is written in His blood, penned by His love, altogether perfectly fitted for you – a Savior who took your stead, left heaven to suffer for you, your sin – on the cross. A Savior who is raised from the dead, has accomplished His great feat, and now offers you the crown. He who is your very light – the light of life, of salvation, of heaven, of eternal fellowship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

What you need He will give you; where you lack, He will supply; even your losses and crosses will be blessed to your eternal gain! He is not a mere hope so; a mere philosophy which might work or might not. He is God our Savior come for you – He commands you to come to Him. He doesn’t put up with excuses, for there are none before Him and His greatness of grace!

Is He not a perfect Mediator, as prophet, He has the perfect Word for you and your life, your situation, your troubles, your destiny? Is He not a perfect priest – not some super priest going about canonizing certain special ones, but a true priest to end all priests – who is also your sacrifice – who will take you in His arms, wash you thoroughly, cleanly, perfectly – present you faultless before His throne, with great glory, joy and acclaim?

And is He not a perfect King – to protect, guard, lead, and provide for you, not just a bare minimum, but life, real life, life more abundant, and free, and everlasting?

He says to you – here are His terms to you now – "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, *According to* the faithful mercies shown to David. Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, A leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you, Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; For He has glorified you. Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares

the LORD. For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa 55:1-9 NAU)

There is an old saying, that unless you stand for something, you will fall for anything. That really isn't true; you can stand for some pretty lame things, and still fall for anything. But unless you stand for the Savior – or better, unless you stand **IN** the Savior, you will fall, not just for anything, but the worst of all things – an eternal devastation which no language on this side of forever can describe.

Have you so come to Christ, bowed the knee and confessed Him as Lord and Savior? Then say in the words of the children's hymn: *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.*

Not my light, but Christ's light in me. You have a *Powerful Apologetic* – a *Powerful Imperative* – a *Powerful Testimony*. This is what our world needs today and always. Amen.

Paul's Call to All – 20b – continual, universal – repent and turn to God; performing deeds appropriate to repentance [repentance heavy]

Paul's Opposition – 21 – by the Jews in the Temple; for the reasons above (message not just to the Gentiles but to the Jews; and the content of the message about the One they crucified and then rejected when the Father raised Him from the dead; pungent that Paul would be the delivery boy); their actions – seized, to put to death.

Paul's Faithful Stand – 22-23

I Stand to Testify

- *By the help that is from God*
- *To this very day – long line of faithfulness*
- *To small and great (no favoritism)*
- *Testifying only and exactly what the OT Prophets led by Moses said would take place:*
 - o *The Messiah would suffer*
 - o *The Messiah would be first to proclaim light to both Jew and Gentile (the World as one)*
 - o *The Messiah would do so by reason of His resurrection from the dead*

Here I stand, by the help of God, testifying to what I had seen – literally – from my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who appeared so gloriously to me, saved me, commissioned me; as I have faithfully testified from the beginning, from Damascus to Jerusalem, from Judea to the Gentiles; declaring to everyone, great and small, Jew or Gentile, their need, their OBLIGATION, to repent and turn to God, doing deeds fitting to repentance; which is why the Jews seized me and sought to kill me – and would kill me still; but I

If you won't stand for something you will fall for anything.

Would, as Bruce writes, the Jews offer such blood-thirsty hatred and malice to Paul for bringing to Gentiles spiritual privileges on the same footing as the Jews? The attack upon their self-righteousness and their sin in Zion must be brought in to make sense of this.

There are three “musts” involved in verse 22b and 23 – that Christ must suffer; that Christ must rise again; that Christ must be first, to begin, to declare light to the Gentiles; could add that there is another must – the Scriptures had declared it; but that is the point – as Bruce, the ‘must’ in these questions is the ‘must’ of God’s determinate counsel and foreknowledge, revealed through His servants the prophets.

OUTLINE:

Christ stood me up – both personally and professionally

I have stood faithful to Him in all these places and to all peoples

I have insisted others stand by repentance and faith and a new life

I have had to resist many attempts by those who would want me to sit down, lie down, even die

I stand by what my forefathers, the prophets and Moses taught, prophesied, would come to pass

I stand by the fulfillment in Jesus – the three-fold must of Messiah’s work: a suffering Christ, a risen Christ, a Christ who brings light and life, (a Christ who is out to save the world).

Luther claimed “we teach no new thing, but we repeat and establish old things, which the apostles and all the godly teachers have taught before.” Or, as Lancelot Andrews, “we are renovators and not innovators.”

Christianity is more to testify than to teach, says Calvin. It is not a list of maybes and hope-so’s that you are invited in, with others, to sift through, to decide what you like or don’t like. The fact that we begin with a solemn call to repent, should awaken us from that kind of day-dream. Salvation is not merely offered; it is declared as a done deal, and you are commanded to be saved. All need to be – great and small; Paul does not fear the dignitaries, nor despise the lowly. (Calvin notices the unity of the church; no such and sad divisions economically or socially or educationally; no upper balcony for the unclean blacks; or blue collars; or browns, reds, or yellows; the Greek cannot despise the foolish Roman; the Roman cannot despise the foolish barbarian; the Jew cannot despise the Gentile; the young, old; the male, female; the free, slave.)