

Faithful Witness

Acts 26:13-23



Who is Central
in Your Life?

We think of faithfulness and dedication as good things. They may be directed, however, and lose all virtue. How do we judge faithfulness? At what point can we claim our own faithfulness to be sufficient? The bombs set off in England this week were engineered and detonated by some whose degree of faithfulness is great, but also greatly misplaced. Looking at faithfulness, there are two aspects that need to claim our attention—to what degree and to whom or what are we faithful?

When we first hear Paul's story in Acts, it is of one whose zeal and faithfulness is great, earnest, and misplaced. His was the story of one like the London bombers, the orchestrators of 9/11, or those behind the Spanish Inquisition. He had plenty of zeal. He was willing to lay down his life or take the life of others in the defense and promotion of the ideals to which he held. On one level, we must admire those who assume great risk to pursue their goals without wavering. Their faithfulness and dedication is sincere, so much more than ours is wont to be. On the other hand, their faithfulness is misdirected.

Paul started out as a zealous follower of the rabbinical traditions of Judaism. He studied at the feet of one of the great rabbis of his day. He took up the fight to preserve the purity of Jewish traditions and protect God's honor as preserved in Jewish thought and practice. He was exceedingly faithful to his cause. He imprisoned the believers who spoke of Jesus as being Messiah. He consented to stoning some like Stephen. He went out of his way to pursue the believers in other cities and countries. His dedication and faithfulness to this cause was extraordinary. It built him a reputation within the ranks of Judaism, as well as among the believers who feared him.

We tend to picture radical change in Paul's life as he met Jesus and accepted Him as Lord. It may be more appropriate, however, not to see the change as radical. The radical change in Paul's life was not a change in degree of faithfulness. It was not a change in character. It was not a personality change, nor one of morality. The primary thing that changed was the objective of Paul's faithfulness. He had served already as a strong witness for his ideals and the preservation of his traditions. More than any other thing, the change in his life at conversion was a refocus of his zeal off tradition and onto Christ Jesus as Lord and Messiah.

In Acts 26, we find Paul imprisoned once again after several imprisonment experiences over the course of his ministry throughout the Roman world. The obstacles of prison, persecution, and beatings did nothing to hinder his faithfulness to serve God as revealed to him in Christ Jesus. Having spread the good news of God's grace in synagogues and marketplaces throughout the world, Paul returned to Jerusalem knowing that imprisonment awaited him. It is from this imprisonment that he speaks now to King Agrippa. All throughout, his faithfulness has remained constant.

In sharing his story before King Agrippa, we find that faithfulness to follow God to the best of his understanding has been the pattern of Paul's life from the beginning. We could learn much from Paul's earnest desire to serve God at whatever cost. We see the degree of his faithfulness and perhaps wonder at how one could live a life so wholly dedicated to serve God against all odds. The story just seems too good to be true—too outlandish to be real. We don't discount it outright, nor would we go so far as to say it is false. Even so, we treat it as though it were from some other world and not our own.

Perhaps that is often the case with the way we read the Bible. It just seems so foreign to hear of the gospel exacting a cost in its claim over our lives. It is so tempting to set up some kind of artificial alter-reality within which to read the Biblical stories and so separate them from the world in which we live. It is tempting to allow the messages of our comfort society to lull our senses and treat life stories such as Paul's as though they were the imagination of a Hollywood screenplay. Perhaps we do the same with the stories of tsunami disasters and explosions in the London Underground. They just seem so farfetched and fantastical. Perhaps they are just the imagination of one more novelist, painting vivid scenes or horror and intrigue that are comfortable only as we relegate them to a world of fiction.

After all, this cannot be what we want from the gospel. Isn't love supposed to be like the fairy tales we know so well? Isn't everything supposed to end "happily ever after?" Aren't rescue and redemption supposed to translate into a life of ease, comfort, and tranquility? Don't the words, "Jesus paid it all," mean that there is no longer any cost associated with my being a follower of Christ Jesus? We have heard over and over that to accept Jesus as Lord would mean that our problems and burdens in life would somehow go away and disappear. So why do the stories of Paul's life contain so many tales of prison, beating, persecution, and pain?

Shouldn't faithfulness to the gospel of Christ Jesus just be about the simple things like knowing that there is one God, asking for forgiveness, and living as morally and ethically as we can? It should be easy, simple, and demand very little of us. After all, aren't we entitled to "the good life"?

There is not much sense of entitlement in Paul's gospel. There is not much sense of comfort in the stories of Paul's repeated imprisonments. There is not much sense of the gospel dulling Paul's senses as he pursues a life of ease. The gospel of Jesus Christ had a claim upon Paul's life that made the issues of the world around him pale in comparison. It was the quality and character of this faithfulness and dedication in Paul that made his life of service so significant.

Why is it so hard to find the same quality of faith in the ranks of our churches today? There are still people in this world who are willing to exhibit the same quality of Paul's dedication and service. Why is it so hard to find them in our midst?

For some reason, it is the dedication of the terrorists of our modern world that mirrors more closely Paul's faithfulness and application of the gospel than the dedication and faithfulness we find in the church in North America. We cannot accept the purpose and ideals behind their dedication and zeal. At the same time, we might do well to reflect on the quality of their misguided faithfulness. The intensity of their zeal and dedication would serve gospel well.

As Paul, we are called to be witnesses for the gospel of Christ Jesus. We are called to do no more than share what we know and have experienced. In a world in which terrorists plan explosions in order to manifest their ideals and will, who will hear the gospel we have to share? What shall be the standard by which we measure the depth and quality of our own faith, witness, and dedication? What message will others hear by the way we live our lives and the words of witness that we proclaim? Do we believe the message of the gospel enough to share it at all costs, or have we somehow transformed it into a charming bedtime story to dull the senses as we drift off to sleep? What shall be the object of our faithful witness?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*