

June 27, 2021

Three Heroes, Forty Thugs, and Just Doing the Right Thing

Acts 23:12-22

This has been the summer of new superhero shows on Disney+. Some of you may have watched the *The Mandalorian*, *Wanda Vision*, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, or the new Loki Series. They're fun. But I don't know any Mandalorians, super soldiers, or mischievous demigods; these are not "my" people. I often revert back to old favourites ... shows like *Corner Gas*. For me, the appeal of these shows is that I know these people. The names may change from Dog River to Lethbridge, these are "my" people; I am these people – I see myself in these characters. And they are definitely NOT superheroes.

I like those parts of Scripture where "I know these people," too. I struggle to relate to Noah or Solomon. But others are more relatable ... In this story, Paul is in Jerusalem, has been framed by the Jewish powers-that-be, and is now under arrest for allegedly inciting a riot.

1. The tragic hero – Paul

Paul is a godly person who tries to do the right thing; most of the time, he does. He loves Jesus. He tries to live his life for Jesus. What happens? He is lashed, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, hungry, thirsty, has a "thorn in the flesh," etc., etc. Now, having been the object of wrath in two riots in Jerusalem (let alone in other cities), Paul is stuck in a Roman prison, with the Jewish leaders plotting to kill him when he is transported to trial.

Do you know any Pauls? People who are good, godly people – who do the right thing, who love Jesus – and yet seem to face setback after setback? Good people to whom bad things happen? Maybe you recognize something of yourself in Paul? You love God; you try to do the right thing; you pray ... yet bad things keep on happening? Part of the good news is this: you're not alone. You are not the first (or last) who will experience this ...

How does Paul handle the adversity? I can get frustrated and angry with God. These kinds of raw emotions come through, loud and clear, in the words of many people in Scripture (see Psalm 22). We don't have these kinds of emotions recorded about Paul. But he probably felt them. We do know Paul doesn't give up or walk away from God. Paul has confidence in:

- **God's presence and care.** He can be at peace about the future, and he can "*pray and sing hymns to God*" even in prison (in Philippi: Acts 16:25).
- **God's provision and strength.** From (a different) prison, he writes, "*I can do all things through him who gives me strength*" (Philippians 4:13) and, "*My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus*" (4:19).
- **God's grace.** He lives God's assurance, "*My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness' ... when I am weak, then I am strong.*" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Paul has not **earned** God's grace. God's grace – His love, care, and provision – are God's gifts to Paul – and to all of us. Sometimes we think we have to be good enough to earn God's favour (God will only love us, care for us, and lead us if we do enough for Him or are

"good enough" people). As a result, we work desperately and load ourselves with guilt. If our salvation depends upon our own human effort, our "good works," or our being perfect, we're all in trouble. None of us is perfect. None of us is good enough for God.

"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast," writes Paul (Ephesians 2:8-9). We can never do enough to merit God's love. He simply gifts us with His love and grace. That is one of the hardest truths to really accept. We like to think earn our way to heaven by doing good deeds. That appeals to our humanness. But can we ever "qualify" for eternal life? Can we ever be perfect enough? No. We always fall short. We need God's grace.

*"We are **God's** handiwork,"* Paul goes on, *"created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which **God** prepared in advance for us to do"* (2:10). God does want us to do "good works," but not to earn His favour. God saves us, by grace. Then the Holy Spirit, within us, encourages us to find our purpose in loving and serving God, His creation, including other people. God loves and cares for us – that's who He is. Because we love God and walk with His Spirit guiding us – that's who we are, we then respond in love to God and others. Life may be hard. But we live in God's love. And we keep on loving others, in His name.

2. The anonymous hero – Paul's nameless nephew

Paul's un-named nephew saves his life. The context is this: Jerusalem is seething with emotions. In the past two days there have been two riots. In a small city back then (maybe 10,000 people) – everybody knows everybody and whose side they are on – Jesus'/Paul's or the Jews who reject Jesus (and Paul)). The Roman garrison is on edge, wondering what will happen next. Soldiers are everywhere.

In this melee, Paul's nephew hears of a plot to assassinate Paul on the road from the jail to the Sanhedrin. This is no little mugging – it will involve 40+ men who have taken desperate vows. The nephew could have ignored what he heard: what could he do? How do you stop a mob? To interfere is to incur the wrath of a band of very determined men (his neighbours).

But the nameless nephew does something. He risks his life to help Paul. Why does he do it? To be noticed – *"Look at me, what a great thing I am doing."* To earn eternal life? Of course not. He acts because the Holy Spirit prompts him to do the right thing. Despite the risks.

Do you know people like that? People whom God has called to do something – and they've done it. Even though few people knew about it? What about you? Has God called you to do the right thing? To take risks? Have you done it? Even if no one knows your name? When we do the right thing, especially anonymously, our faith grows tremendously, doesn't it? But when we have the chance to do the right thing and don't take it, our souls shrivel.

Theodore Roosevelt said, *"In a moment of decision the best thing you can do is the right thing. The second-best thing you can do is the wrong thing. The worst thing you can do is nothing."* Keep your ear to the ground for the opportunity to "be good news"... (Stay anonymous if you possibly can ... then we're sure our motives are right.)

3. The unlikely hero – Claudius Lysias

Claudius Lysias is the commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem. As far as we know, he has no religious convictions – yet. Paul has already presented his case before him – he was open-minded enough to give Paul an honest hearing (Acts 21:37-22:21). Unlike the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate's treatment of Jesus, Claudius Lysias does not just hand Paul over for flogging and lynching to please the crowd; he is genuinely concerned that justice is done. He does what is right, even when most people are angry with him.

This is courageous leadership. It takes a lot of courage to do what is right when the opinion of the mob is against you. What a great role model for leaders today. What a great role model for all of us today. In Claudius Lysias' case he is risking a violent rebellion that could have cost him his command or a severe reprimand from his superior, Governor Felix (who was a spineless people-pleaser, and would probably have said, "*Just give the people what they want*"). He is risking at least losing a promotion, if not earning a demotion.

Do you know a person who stands up for what is right, no matter what? Are you that way? Pray that God would give each of us the courage to do what is right, even when that is not a popular option. May we never compromise our faith or character to "fit in," be popular, go with the crowd, or get ahead.

Claudius Lysias is a "good" person. Imagine how much even better he would be if he knew Jesus? C.S. Lewis once mused, "*Imagine a nice young man and a cantankerous old maid. One is a Christian; one is not. Who's the Christian? There's no way to tell. Maybe the nice young man is not a Christian; who knows how much nicer he might be if he were? Maybe the cantankerous old maid is a Christian; who knows how much more cantankerous she might be if she were not?*" Pray for those you know who need to know Jesus. And pray for opportunities to share your faith, authentically, honestly, and lovingly with those people.

4. The "anti-heroes" – the Jewish zealots

40+ men make an oath not to eat or drink till they kill Paul or die of starvation or thirst. Curiously, these men are so concerned with God's honour they're willing to lie and murder (breaking two of the 10 Commandments) out of "devotion" to God? Does the end justify the means? What do you think? (Do they succeed? No. Do they keep their vow? I wonder)

Do you know people like this? There are those who accuse other Christians of heresy or worse. In a *Christianity Today* article, "[The Attack Dogs of Christendom](#)," David Aikman writes, "*Some Christians have turned themselves into the self-appointed attack dogs of Christendom. They seem determined to savage not only opponents of Christianity, but also fellow believers of whose doctrinal positions they disapprove. A troll through the Internet reveals websites so drenched in sarcasm and animosity that an agnostic, or a follower of another faith tradition interested in what it means to become a Christian, might be permanently disillusioned.*"

Ontario pastor, Carey Nieuwhof writes of 2020-2021, "*This may be the year where almost*

everyone considered deleting their social media accounts. I know I did. I searched for the right adjective to describe the tone of Christian posts I've seen this year, and the best one I could come up with was 'mean'. What many church leaders forget is that whenever you post, the world is watching. That jab you took at someone you don't like. That right hook you threw at someone who's different than you. The cynical/angry/sarcastic rant you posted thinking you told everyone what they need to know. You know those posts? The ones that get commented on and shared because the internet likes anger? Those posts.

"I'm guessing it leaves non-Christians wondering why Christians are so mean. It leaves me wondering that. The unchurched are watching. And listening. For the most part, you don't even realize they are. But your profile is public. And they know ... they're connecting the dots. And maybe, just maybe, while they're watching and listening, they're walking away. 2020 was not the Christian world's finest hour on social media. Time and time again, when the world needed love, Christians gave it judgment. It's not our job to judge the world. It's our job to love it." ([New Exodus](#))

Are we a bit of a zealot, religious or otherwise? Are our speech, email, texts, or Instagram account ever "*drenched in sarcasm and animosity*"? Those are NOT Christian values.

Some good news? When we come humbly before God and confess our sins, God forgives us, freely, for all those evil thoughts we've had. When we acknowledge, before Him, the nasty things we have done/said (or thought), He forgives us. When, in humility, we repent of those cutting emails or comments, He forgives us. When we experience God's forgiveness it's like a huge burden lifted off our shoulders. There is joy and freedom in our souls

Yes, God will also encourage us to make things "right" with the person we have hurt. In humility, we do need to make things right. We need to confess our blunders. That's hard. But when we do that, we experience a new joy and a new freedom in our hearts, as well.

If 2021 were a TV show, who would you be? Maybe you're a superhero? Or do you feel like a tragic hero? An anonymous hero? An unlikely hero? An anti-hero? Or a bit of each one?

God doesn't expect us to be Super Man or Wonder Woman. God created us who we are. He simply wants us to be the best "us" we can be. God's promise to Paul – and to all of us – is: *Do your best. "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."*

Opportunities simply to "do the right thing" – to serve God – come to us every day. Will we take them? Or let them pass by? What holds us back? Some of those things that seem "least" to us, things that no one else knows about, thing we may even forget about, can actually make the biggest impact. We just never know. Let's just do the right thing.

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