

In America we may not be losing our belief in God, but we are losing our religion. While we may not be turning into atheists, we seem quite content to accept the idea of faith being privately engaging, but culturally irrelevant. Sociologists would say this is because of the process of secularization.

Think about how faith itself is tended. It needs *support*. Apart from a Christian community, we quickly wither. We need a context of encouragement. Beliefs don’t exist in a vacuum; they need to be nurtured, reinforced. A secularized world no longer offers the deep religious socialization and the frequent reaffirmation of beliefs necessary for a distinctive faith to flourish. The declining social significance of religion will inevitably cause a decline in the *number* of religious people and the extent to which those people are religious. When society no longer *supports* religious affirmation, the difficulty of maintaining individual faith increases dramatically.

Shortly after Paul arrives in Jerusalem the religious leaders express the negative impression Jewish believers had of Paul and what he had been teaching in Ephesus and beyond: *“You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law. They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.”* (Acts 21:20-22)

Don’t you think this statement sounds a bit like religious leaders were blaming Paul for the “declining social significance of religion” in their city? It’s interesting for a couple of reasons. First, it tells us that the gospel was making great inroads among the Jewish people, with *“many thousands”* of Jews having become believers, followers of Jesus whom they accepted as the Jewish Messiah. Second, the statement reveals that the Jewish believers were all *“zealous for the law.”* This indicates the rift that was developing between Paul’s mission to the Gentiles and the mother church in Jerusalem.

With the urging of Paul and the support of Peter, the elders in Jerusalem had earlier conceded that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised nor follow most of the Law of Moses in order to be followers of Christ. But other leaders apparently believed and taught that Jewish followers of Jesus were still to be circumcised and to obey the Law. There had been cases where Paul had gone along with that view when it was important to reach Jews, but he did not believe that God required Jews to obey the Law or be circumcised. In this, the believers in Jerusalem were right: Paul was neither as zealous for the Law as they were, nor did he insist that Jews obey the Law, follow the traditions, or have their children circumcised.

Paul describes his approach to the Law and reaching people for Christ in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22 (which we’ll look at next Sunday) : *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.*

Though Paul may not have encouraged Jews to set aside the Law, he did not believe that living under the Law was the basis of salvation. Paul believed that salvation—right standing with God—the blessings, love, and mercy of God, the gift of life now and life eternal was a gift received only by faith.

Luke's dramatic account of Paul's arrest, imprisonment, and trials in Jerusalem and Caesarea on the way to Rome, provides us with a magnificent description of Christian *faith and courage*. Acts affords us the opportunity to recognize and imitate Paul's *faith and courage* in the midst of persecution. He had an amazing resiliency under impossible strain because of the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Luke shows how the Holy Spirit sustains us in the pressures and stresses of life. The Apostle's faith was well tested. Now his courage would be tested. Of course, we know about Paul's work and ministry two millennia after the fact through his writings. He was a prolific writer.

A few months before his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul had *written* to the church at Rome about the stabilizing power of the Lord in the stresses of life. He told them, "*I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith*" (Romans 1:11-12). Then, after describing the source of that *stability* in Christ, he closed his letter with, "*Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past...*" (Romans 16:25).

The Greek word translated as "establish" is from *sterizo*—to make stable. The stability Paul longed to impart to the Christians at Rome is what he displayed in Jerusalem and Caesarea during the months of excruciating conflict. Luke—also a writer—gives us the privilege of living with the Apostle each step of the way. The same *courage* Paul received from the Lord is available to us today. That's what every one of us need to know. Life for us is not always easy. It has its own challenges, difficulties, and conflicts. Serious students of the Scriptures will want to follow Luke's story line through Paul's ordeals.

That could also be immeasurably encouraging to others. We must be faithful to explain the history of the early church in a way that provides hope for Christian people living today. By following the theme of Christ-implanted *courage* in the life of the Apostle Paul, we see in the Acts account the implications of these events. More importantly we can be assured of the stability (the *sterizo*) available to us even today—through faith.

When we consider the theme of *courage* as the central thread in Luke's account, we are able to learn so much more about this man who was "called to write."

Recently, I read about one of America's leading market research analysts who spent his life polling what people think and feel about living today. One of his comments has lingered in my mind: "Don't forget the needs of people. They are living with tremendous stress and they need *courage*. Just know this: when you help them to live *courageously*, you will always be on target." This portion of the book of Acts gives us a guide to live in just that way—*courageously*.

And let's remind ourselves that there was no "freedom of speech" in the first century Roman Empire. When Paul wrote his epistles to the upstart band of churches in Asia Minor and Europe, he was putting his life on the line. We take it so for granted that we can say and write just about anything we want today. Freedom of speech today means we are free to disparage, free to demean, free to slander, and let's not forget, free to lie. If you can't believe this is happening today, you've probably never read comment threads on social media.

Most everyone agrees that Paul's writing was more impressive than his speaking. Paul himself writes in 2 Corinthians 10:9-10: *I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."* It's also worth considering Paul's view of Scripture that was at the heart of his conflict with Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

Adam Hamilton says, "Some groups, such as the Sadducees and Samaritans, considered only the Law of Moses to have binding authority, with the rest considered important ancient works but lacking the force of the Law. Other groups actually considered additional documents, besides the "books" of our Old Testament, to be Scripture as well. The most prominent of these groups was the Essenes, who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. Found among the Dead Sea Scrolls were documents that the Essenes treated as Scripture, most of which did not have the force of Scripture among other Jews. The Pharisees considered most of the documents included in our Old Testament to be sacred Scripture—not only the Law, but also the Prophets and the Writings. Interestingly, Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, included some documents as sacred Scripture that the Jews in Jerusalem ultimately rejected.

These differences among the various collections of Scripture are reflected today in the differences in English versions of the Old Testament found in the Bibles of the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the various Protestant churches. When Paul wrote that "*all scripture is inspired by God*" in 2 Timothy 3:16, I believe he meant the three categories of Scripture embraced by the Pharisees and Essenes—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings—were all inspired by God" (Hamilton, Adam. *The Call*. Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition).

The fact that Paul's writings are part of Holy Scripture *today* would perhaps come as a shock to Paul if he was aware of it. Yet listen to what Christian author John Piper is quoted as saying: "Besides Jesus, no one has kept me from despair, or taken me deeper into the mysteries of the gospel, than the Apostle Paul. No one has had a greater impact on the world for eternal good than the Apostle Paul—except Jesus himself." John Piper goes on to ask, "Can a Christian-killer really endure 195 lashes out of a heart of love? Can a mystic who thinks he was caught up into heaven be a model of rationality? Can an ethnocentric Jew write a beautiful call to reconciliation? Can a person who lives with constant pain write about rejoicing always? Can a man write about the horrors of human sin and then take delight in human glory?"

Whether Paul was acquitted after the two years described in Acts or remained in prison until his death, we know that he continued to preach, teach, and write letters during the final years of his life. Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, known as the Prison Epistles, all clearly state that Paul was in prison or "in chains" when he wrote them.

Philippians is one of my absolute favorite Pauline letters. Likely written during his house arrest, Paul writes this timeless message: "*And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*" (4:7).

I believe that the peace that passes all understanding is exactly what enabled Paul to write...and write...and write.

Because I seek that same peace, I will continue to read...and read...and read everything that Paul wrote. Amen.