

Courage to Take Risks

by Bruce Hostetler and Carol Duerksen

FAITH STORY:

Acts 23:1-35

FAITH FOCUS:

Paul is commissioned by God in the previous chapter to “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.” Paul is aware of his own pre-Damascus Road thinking and knows the Jews will not listen to him. The situation quickly gets out of control as the crowd works itself into a frenzy. They begin throwing off their coats, kicking up dust and shouting, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.” Paul is arrested by the Roman tribune in order to find out what the fuss is all about. Paul’s Roman citizenship saves him from being flogged, but it is obvious the Jews will kill him if given an opportunity. Paul is ordered to appear before the Jewish Council under Roman supervision, to find out what he is being accused of by the Jews. Chapter 23 continues as the hatred escalates into a conspiracy to ambush and kill Paul as he is being brought back on a pretext of “A more thorough examination of his case.”

SESSION GOAL:

To help understand that being involved in God’s purpose and plans requires courage and risk.

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- Bibles
- Pencils, paper, markers
- White board and markers
- Copies of the case study for group discussion
- Bible commentaries for Acts
- Invite one or more persons from your congregation to come share with the class about times when they took a risk (large or small) to do what was right. Be prepared to do so yourself as well.
- Stick-on name tags

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS:

Welcome students and visitors.

Tell the students about the following scenario:

A study was done that staged an obese lady sitting on a park bench reading, while a group of teenage kids verbally abused her. The people involved were professional actors, and the idea was to see if people walking past would come to the lady's defense. Only a few did, but the most surprising outcome was how awful the actors felt as they were acting out the scene.

Ask: What do you think you would do if you witnessed this event? Do you think you could have done what the actors did without feeling bad? Why or why not?

Ask students to recall a personal or news event of someone getting involved in a situation that required choice, risk, action, and possible injury.

CONNECT:

Divide into small groups. Give each group a copy of the Case Study. Ask them to read it and discuss: If you were in Jamie's shoes, what would you do? What are your options? What are the possible consequences of each option? What Biblical principal might apply in your decision?

Bring the groups back together and discuss their thoughts and conclusions. Write the conclusions and the Biblical principals on the whiteboard.

EXPLORE THE BIBLE:

Lead your group through the Bible passage, reading the verses and discussing the questions that follow. Use the Bible commentaries and the Insights to add to your knowledge about this passage.

Verses 1-5

What happened?

Why did the high priest want Paul's mouth to be slapped?

Why did Paul dis the high priest?

Why didn't he apologize?

Verses 6-10

Do you think Paul deliberately tried to pit the Sadducees and Pharisees against each other? Why or why not?

If so, did it backfire?

Verse 11

How do you think the Lord “stood near” Paul?

Verses 12-15

Why were the Jews so mad at Paul?

Verses 16-22

What was the risk that Paul’s nephew was taking?

Verses 23-34

Why do you think the tribune rescued Paul?

- He was a good guy
- He wanted justice
- God used him

Discuss:

- What was God’s purpose in the events recorded in Acts 23?
- Every person had options in the story. Who chose right? Who chose wrong?
- What does the story tell us about courage when following God’s will?
- How did Paul’s nephew know exactly what to do with the information he learned about the ambush?
- Did any of the Biblical principals that we wrote on the board apply to this story?

APPLY:

Invite your guest(s) to share about taking a risk to do what is right. Share yours as well, and then invite students to recall stories that have happened to them or someone they know. Assure them that it doesn't have to be a huge thing—just examples.

Ask: What is the difference between you and a famous person taking a risk to do something right?

Answer: The only difference is that more people know about it if a famous person does it. In God's eyes, it's all the same. God will "stand near" you when you do what is right.

RESPOND:

Hand out the stick-on name tags. Ask students to think about one risk they are willing to take to do what is right. Again, it can be anything—something that would be seen as a "big deal," or something that might be seen as small. Ask them to write it on the name tag and wear it—but only if they are serious about it. (Of course, the first risk they will take will be to wear the tag so others can see what they have committed to.) Assure students that it's okay not to do this—you would rather they be honest than write something just because everyone else is.

Optional: brainstorm about a group activity that involves some risk-taking and plan to do it together.

Close with prayer, asking God to give you all the courage to take risks for the Kingdom of God.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Acts 23 finds the Apostle Paul before the council of the Sanhedrin and it ends in something resembling a street brawl. The high priest, Ananias, orders Paul to be hit in the face. As a high priest he used the most dishonest methods to win favor with the people. Paul loses his cool, and in return calls Ananias a whitewashed wall. It was an epithet expressing unlimited contempt, comparing Ananias to something unclean that had been painted white so no one would touch it by mistake and become unclean also. It is unclear whether Paul really didn't know Ananias was the high priest, but he does not go so far as to apologize for what he said.

In the previous chapter Paul used his "Roman Citizen card" to avoid an "examination for truth" that would have undoubtedly left him badly injured or dead. As it turned out, the tribune treated Paul very well all the way to see the governor. The tribune was no doubt worried that Paul might refer back to the way he had been bound and illegally treated without a trial.

The following night the Lord stood by Paul and encouraged him. It seems that the Lord did not save Paul "from" danger, but rather "in" danger. There were so many times Paul was on the brink of disaster, yet he always managed to escape through it. Paul had a job to do and it took courage and strength from God to do it.

Paul's nephew appears no other place in scripture. All we find out about him is that somehow he discovered an evil plot and did what he could to stop it. We are challenged to do what we can to stop evil when we have the opportunity to do so, even at the cost of danger to ourselves.

The Interpreters Bible, p. 299-302

Session Reproducibles

CASE STUDY

Nick's mother didn't show up for a couple of weeks at work. Now, she and Nick are faced with the inability to pay the rent for the second month in a row. Their landlord has already given notice that if they are late with the rent again they're out of the apartment. Nick knows they have nowhere to go because all of their friends and relatives have "had it" with his mother's habits. Nick's friend Tyler works at a local food market, and he decides to ask Tyler to help him "borrow" some money for the rent. Tyler has been in trouble before for violent behavior, and he knows that if he gets caught it could spell disaster. But Nick insists, "Come on Tyler all you have to do is tell me when your shift changes and you 'cash out' the register. Then, when you cause a diversion, I'll grab the money and split. Nobody will ever know you helped set it up."

Jamie, a stock clerk, gets involved when Tyler tells him to "accidentally" knock over some shelves with the forklift at exactly 6:55 when the shift changes. When Jamie protests, Tyler says, "If you don't help me out here man, you'll wish you would have. Besides, if we get caught, I'll tell the cops you were in on it anyway!"

Jamie is scared to death because he knows Tyler is a mean guy and will do what he says.

Discuss: If you were in Jamie's shoes, what would you do? What are your options? What are the possible consequences of each option? What can you find in the Bible that supports the options?