Faithful Under Pressure

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[0:00] Welcome to Built on God's Word, the preaching and teaching ministry of Highland Park Baptist Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.! Pastor Mike Scrivani teaches on Acts 21, verses 17-36.

We are in Acts chapter 21, verses 17-36. We have been with Paul as he is traveling back towards Jerusalem.
He's got an offering he's collected from the Gentile believers' churches. And so he's coming to Jerusalem and he's aware, the Holy Spirit has made him aware, that imprisonment and afflictions await him when he arrives.
And so tonight we see him back in Jerusalem and the beginning fulfillments of the afflictions that he will endure. But the good that the Lord will do through that as he gains an audience and the gospel continues to be shared further and wider by the Apostle Paul.
So Acts chapter 21, verses 17-36. If you want to follow along with me. When he had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day, Paul went with us to James and all the elders were present.
[1:22] After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God and they said to him, You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed they are zealous for the law.

And they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done?
They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. Take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads.
Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance to the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality.
Then Paul took the men. In the next day, he purified himself along with them and went to the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each of them.
[2:30] When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law in this place.

Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place. For they had previously seen Trophimus, the Ephesian, with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.
Then all the city was stirred up and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. As they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.
He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them, and when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains.
He inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another, and as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.

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[3:35] And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, for the mob of the people followed, crying out, away with him. So again, over the past several weeks, we've followed Paul as he's made his way back to Jerusalem.

Paul is going back with an offering he's collected from the Gentile churches, which is to be given to the believers in Jerusalem.
Paul's hope is that this offering will not just meet the physical needs of the believers in the Jerusalem church, but also further establish a connection between Gentiles and Jews, Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians.
Again, he's aware that imprisonment and affliction await him in Jerusalem. He's shared this news with different groups of believers in different cities as he's made his way back towards Jerusalem. The believers that he's shared this news with, remember, have pleaded with him to not go, to stay where he's at. However, Paul is certain that he must carry out this mission, that he must go, and he's trusting that this is God's will for his life.
[4:53] So if you look back at Acts 20, verse 24, there it says, Now behold, Paul's speaking, I'm going to Jerusalem constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course of the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.
So as we've seen the past couple of weeks, Paul has had many heartfelt farewells. His brothers and sisters in Christ are sad to see him go, knowing what awaits him when he gets to Jerusalem. But when he returns to Jerusalem, not everybody there is happy to see him. He received quite a mixed reception. Some were glad to see him.
Others were troubled by the news of his arrival, and those who were glad to see him were also troubled by the news of his arrival. So he gets this mixed reaction when he arrives in Jerusalem, a mixture of celebration, confusion, and then as we see conflict.
[6:08] Paul could not control how people responded to his arrival, but what he could control was his commitment to remain faithful to the Lord's command and plan for his life, a principle that we learn from this text tonight.

So the main idea from our study is you cannot control how others respond to your faithfulness to the Lord, but you can choose to remain faithful to the Lord no matter the consequences.
Again, to this point, we've seen how some believers chose to respond to Paul's faithfulness to follow the Holy Spirit, guiding him back to Jerusalem and Caesarea after Agabus gave his prophecy using Paul's belt as a visual aid to demonstrate the imprisonment and the afflictions that awaited him in Jerusalem.
The Caesareans believed, as well as Paul's traveling companions, including Luke, that Paul should stay, and they urged him not to go. So look again with me at Acts 20, 12 through 14.
And Luke is including himself with this group here. When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart?
[7:34] For I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of Jesus Christ. And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, Let the will of the Lord be done.

These believers came to the realization that Paul was constrained by the Holy Spirit, that he was bound to do the Lord's will.
At times he acted on other believers' concerns for his welfare when it meant that his ministry would be impeded. We saw that in Acts chapter 9, and we see that in Acts chapter 9, verses 23 through 25.
Paul's conversion infuriated the local Jewish leaders in Damascus who plotted to kill him. And so Paul's disciples helped him escape, if you remember, by lowering him over the city walls down in a side of basket.
In Acts chapter 9, verses 26 through 30, Paul arrived in Jerusalem and boldly debated with the Hellenistic Jews who were enraged, again enraged by his conversion and his argumentation.
[8:44] And so they also sought to kill him, and Paul evaded their plot by going to Caesarea and leaving Jerusalem on his way to Tarsus. In Acts chapter 17, verses 1 through 14, a mob in Thessalonica started a riot to capture Paul and Silas.

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Later, when Paul moved on to preach in Berea, the same agitators from Thessalonica traveled to where he was to stir up the crowds there against him in both cities.
The local Christians gave Paul advice to flee for his safety, which he took. Later, when we get to Acts chapter 23, verses 12 through 35, we'll read about a group of 40 men who bound themselves to an oath that they would not drink or eat until they killed Paul.
They planned to ambush him as he was being transferred by Roman guards, and Paul's nephew caught wind of this plot. He told Paul, who then instructed him to go tell the Roman commander, who beefed up Paul's security and prevented the plot from being hatched.
In those moments, Paul understood that these plots were an impediment to the Lord's will for his life. But in this moment, he understood that the afflictions awaiting him in Jerusalem were the Lord's will for his life.
[10:11] Because he would end up taking the gospel further, and his imprisonment and afflictions would give him a new audience to preach the gospel to.

Sometimes the circumstances we want to avoid or that others want us to avoid are circumstances that we shouldn't avoid, because they are opportunities for the Lord to use us to share the gospel. You cannot control how others respond to your faithfulness to the Lord, but you can choose to remain faithful to the Lord no matter the consequences. So we see that principle carried out in a few different scenes here.
The first is Paul's commitment to the church, his commitment to the church. Verse 17 again says, Surely the believers in Jerusalem were thankful for the offering Paul collected from the Gentile churches, which would significantly help their physical needs.
But more significantly, they were elated by the news Paul reported about how many new additions to the Christian family there were through his ministry, through the Lord, what he was doing through his missionary journeys.
[11:28] And as he was going town to town and sharing the gospel and all the conversions and all of the new family members that were added to the church. Verses 18 and 19 says, So if you remember, the Jerusalem church was originally led by the apostles, but by this time, the apostles had left the leadership there to elders.

One of the apostles, James, the brother of John, was martyred back in Acts 12, 2. The others were out doing evangelistic missionary work.
And so we have elders here who are leading the church. And the one who's the spokesperson here is James, not the apostle, but James, the brother of Jesus, half brother of Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph.
And so James is the spokesperson here. Remember, during Jesus's earthly ministry before his crucifixion, that James, his brother, and his other family members, they didn't believe that he was the Messiah.
But after Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, James became a believer and is now one of the elders in the Jerusalem church. The beginning of verse 20 says, And when they heard it, they glorified God.
[12:54] Notice that the glory, the praise given for this report that Paul gave, they didn't praise Paul. Paul didn't seek their praise.

He gave credit to the Holy Spirit and they praised God for the work that had been done through him. Paul was committed to the ministry that the Lord gave him to do, but always gave the credit and the glory to God.
Galatians 6.14 says, But far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.
As we've continued our study in Acts, we've seen Paul's commitment to the church, his commitment to establish elders and also to equip them, his commitment to preach and to teach.
Sometimes, as we saw here recently in Acts, sometimes going into the night, into the dawn, just preaching and teaching and having discussion about God's word with believers.
[14:00] We see his commitment to collect an offering and make sure that it was going to get to those who were in need of it. And his commitment to make sure that it is God who gets the glory in his life for all the things that the Lord had him to do.

So now we move on to the second scene here, Paul's concession for the gospel. Paul's concession for the gospel. The elders and the believers in the church in Jerusalem received Paul's report with

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joy, but again, their joy is mixed with concern.
So if we look at the rest of verse 20 to 22, The elders and the believers in the Jerusalem church expressed their concern over many thousands, myriads, literally tens of thousands of people is what they're talking about among the Jews who were zealous for the law.
These were Jewish Christians who have remained devoted to the ceremonial aspects of the law. While not viewing them as a means to salvation, they still observed the feast and dietary restrictions.
And so why were they zealous to keep the law? John Polhill, biblical scholar, does a good job to just share more of the background.
[15:45] Like what was the context? What was going on at this point in time in history that made the Jews so jealous to keep the law and so opposed to the apostle Paul?

And so it's kind of lengthy, but it's helpful. He says, Faithfulness to the Torah was nothing new for the Jewish Christians. Basically, that was what the agreement at the Jerusalem Council was all about.
The Jewish Christians would remain faithful to the Jewish law, but Gentile converts would not be subjected to it except for the special provision of the apostolic decree. What was new to the present situation is hidden in the word zealous.
Paul's arrival in Jerusalem probably was in spring of AD 56 or 57 during the procuratorship of Felix. Josephus described this period in the mid-50s as a time of intense Jewish nationalism and political unrest.
One insurrection after another rose to challenge the Roman overlords, and Felix brutally suppressed them all. This only increased the Jewish hatred for Rome and inflamed anti-Gentile sentiments.
[16:51] Considering public relations, Paul's mission to the Gentiles would not have been well received. The Jerusalem elders were in somewhat of a bind. On the one hand, they had supported Paul's witness to the Gentiles at the Jerusalem conference.

Now they found Paul a persona non grata, and his mission discredited not only among their more recent converts. They did not want to reject Paul. Indeed, they praised God for his success.
Still, they had their own mission to the Jews to consider, and for that, Paul was a distinct liability.
Whether the rumor was spread by Jews in the diaspora, or were spread by Paul's enemies, or were spread by the Judaizers, Jews who said you had to first convert to Judaism before you could become a Christian, Luke doesn't say.
But this did pose a very serious problem. There was a lot of tension already, and now Paul has arrived during this very tense time, and a lot of people were very, very upset with Paul, as we see.
And just thinking about that, just rumors and gossip and how things spread, this is a good time for us to remember that we need to practice our Lord's instruction whenever you hear a rumor, whenever you hear gossip, to practice Matthew 18.
[18:20] Before you go, well, don't go talk to somebody else about something. That's how rumors spread. You just go directly to that person. One thing I learned early in ministry from when I was a youth pastor, from our senior pastor, people would say things to me, and then I would go and say things to him.

He said, hey, next time anybody does that, you tell them, have you gone and talked to that person? If they say no, then say, don't talk to me until you've talked to that person. Or, he said, if they tell you something, say, well, I'm going to go talk to that person.
I'm going to let them know that you told me. Is that okay? And then, you know, you're, oh, no, no, or something along those lines. So, rumors and gossip are destructive.
They create problems. And so, it's always, always best to follow our Lord's principle to go directly to that person, have that conversation. And if there is someone who wants to use you as a third party, then say, hey, you need to go talk to that person.
Or, okay, if I go talk to that person, I'm going to let them know that I've heard this from you. Is that okay? And see what happens. The elders feared a confrontation between Paul and the misinformed zealots of the law.
[19:34] And so, they suggested a compromise in verses 23 through 25. It says, do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. Take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads.

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Thus, all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality.
The elders propose a practical way to demonstrate that the false accusations presented against Paul are just that, that they are false.
There were four Christians of Jewish descent who had taken a Nazirite vow. Now, the word Nazir in Hebrew means to be separated or consecrated.
The Nazirite vow was voluntary. It involved abstaining from wine, involved not getting a haircut, and other actions that demonstrated pious devotion to the Lord for a time.
[20:53] It always had, these vows, these Nazirite vows always had a specific time frame. And so, these four men were nearing the end of the time frame of their vow, which was customarily completed in the temple.

The ceremony, again, involves cutting their hair and burning it as an offering. And it also, the ceremony, the completion of this vow, required many sacrifices to be made.
We read about that in Numbers 6, verses 13 through 15. And this is the law for the Nazirite. When the time of his separation has been completed, he shall be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and he shall bring his gift to the Lord.
One male lamb, a year old without blemish, for a burnt offering, and a ewe lamb, a year old without blemish, as a sin offering, and one ram without blemish, as a peace offering, and a basket of unleavened bread, loaves of fine flour mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers seared with oil, in their grain offering and their drink offerings.
So, not only did you have to get a haircut, probably pay for somebody to cut your hair, you also had to provide all of these sacrifices.
[22:10] So, financially, these things added up. And so, the elders suggested that Paul go with these men and pay for these expenses.

By joining these men as they completed this vow and paying for their expenses, the thought was that the rumors that had spread about Paul would be proven false, and thus there would be peace. Sounds like an okay plan. Well, verse 25 is also important because while the elders encouraged Paul in this activity, they indicated here that the decree of the Jerusalem Council regarding Gentiles had not changed.
Gentiles were not required to observe the ceremonies and rituals of the Mosaic Law. And so, what we see happening here is Paul agrees to this proposal, and this shouldn't be surprising to us because we know that he was ready to be a Jew to the Jews.
He would gladly participate in this symbolic act of Jewish piety if that would help to justify his Gentile missionary work in the eyes of the Jewish Christians.
[23:22] Look at 1 Corinthians 9, 19-23. Here Paul says, To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. Paul writes about the freedoms that we have as Christians in Christ in Romans chapter 14, but he says there, and we need to remember that we shouldn't abuse those freedoms, especially if it causes a weaker, a less spiritually mature brother or sister to stumble. Paul didn't have to participate in the ceremony, but in the case of weaker brothers, he participated because he prioritized the church's unity, the unity of Jew and Gentile as one in Christ. So we see in verse 26, then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went to the temple giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them. So now we come to the third scene here, Paul's conflict with the crowd. Mike Tyson, one of my favorite quotes, Mike Tyson once said, everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth. And I think once he was on the downside of his career, once he got punched in the mouth, his plan was to bite people's ears, which, you know, not just bite them, but bite them off. So we had a plan here. Ultimately, the plan did not go as they planned. Verse 27, when the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the crowd and laid hands on him. The Jews from Asia may have included those from

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Ephesus who, if you remember, forced Paul to relocate his teaching from the synagogue to the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Acts 19.9. They knew Trophimus, which we read in verse 29, a Christian from Ephesus who came to Jerusalem with Paul. Since Luke mentions the impact of Paul's ministry on all people who lived in the province of Asia, both Jews and Greeks in Acts 19.10, 22, 26, 20, 16, and 18, Jews of other cities may have been involved as well in this angry group of people. These Jews were like Paul. He wanted to go before Pentecost. And so they were on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to attend the Feast of Pentecost. And they see Paul, they recognize him, they know who he is, they stir up the crowd, and then they seize him. Paul is inside of the temple when this is happening. He's surrounded by a crowd of very angry people. It looks like this could be the end. And then Luke records the accusations levied against Paul by the
Jews from Asia in verse 28. So this large crowd surrounding Paul, seizing Paul, are crying out, men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law in this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled the holy place. These were serious accusations. They're crying out in the Greek as a present participle, meaning they were continually shouting this thing. So they weren't just saying it once, they were saying it over and over and over again. The Jews from the province of Asia bring five charges against Paul. The first three are described in terms of Paul's opposition or attack against the foundations of the Jewish commonwealth, while the last two charges are linked with the accusation that he teaches against the temple, which makes this accusation the central charge. The accusations resemble here the charges that were brought against Stephen back in Acts chapter 6. And we know how that ended. It ended with Stephen's martyrdom. So the first charge that Paul teaches against our people isn't totally true.
[28:10] Paul always preached in the synagogues, remember? Before he would preach to the Gentiles, whenever he came to a new city, he would go first to the Jews. Paul didn't teach against them. He taught to them.

They were sinners in need of a Savior. That Savior is the Messiah who their scriptures foretold. Paul did teach against external religious observances like circumcision, which the Jews trusted in for salvation. In that sense, the Jews accused Paul of erasing all of the law because he preached and taught against that. As it pertains to the temple, Paul taught that Jesus was sent by God as Israel's Messiah, whose death and resurrection procures forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The temple was thus no longer the exclusive place where God's forgiveness was received. The Lamb of God had come.
Salvation was purchased by his bloodshed on the cross to atone for our sins. The temple and the sacrifices pointed to the coming and the atoning work of Jesus Christ. As far as Paul's bringing Greeks into the temple, that charge was just unfounded. The temple court had a court on the outside for the Gentiles and they were not permitted to go into the inner courts closer to the Holy of Holies. And so these Asian Jews who saw Paul, who recognized Trophimus when they were outside of the temple, just assumed that Paul had brought this Greek into him. So he, Paul must have obviously been inside in one of the inner courts. And so they were accusing him of breaking their customs and the rules by bringing a Greek into places in the temple where they were not permitted to go. Verses 29 through 30, for they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city. And they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Then all the city was stirred up and the people ran together. They seized
Paul and dragged him out of the temple. And at once the gates were shut. So Paul is once again in conflict. The plan which he accepted did not go as planned, but everything was going according to the plan of God who is sovereign over all. Paul suddenly had a large audience to preach the gospel to, but first he was rescued from the mob's attempt to kill him. I've said this before, but you know, as we've gone through Acts, you notice that Christians don't riot and they don't form mobs. The mobs and the rioting that we see all throughout the book of Acts are enemies of the church, enemies of Christianity. They are being used by the enemy, by Satan to create problems for God's people. And so you just think about it even today and you read in the news of the riots that are taking place in France. Have you guys been watching that in Paris? And just the destruction. And you also see the chanting and I think you would see too, like a lot of people out there, they don't even know what they're doing besides they're just out there doing stuff, going along with the crowd and they're just angry. They're upset and they just want to destroy. And it's sad. And we see that in the book of Acts as well. And we see that here, these people who are just stirred up, they're angry and it's a tense

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situation. They're mad at the Romans, they're mad at Paul. And so they have an opportunity to riot and cause a lot of disruption. So now we come to the fourth scene, Paul's courage under pressure, his courage under pressure. Verse 31 through 36 again. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was, what he had done. Some of the crowd were shouting one thing, some another.

As he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd for the mob of the people followed, crying out away with him. The tribune, the Roman tribune in charge of Jerusalem at this time was a man named Claudius Lysias. And he'll be named in Acts chapter 23, verse 26. A Roman tribune was a high ranking Roman military officer in charge of a cohort, in charge of a thousand soldiers. Since the Roman procurator or governor of Judea usually resided in Caesarea most of the time, the tribune's job, lucky him, was to try to keep peace in Jerusalem, which was a very hard place to try to keep the peace. So they were on the edge of their seats just anticipating riots and problems and issues. And so they hear the temple and, you know, a lot of people are in the temple. So when it says the whole city, I mean, well, a lot of people there, almost a lot of people in the city. And so there's this huge uproar. And the Roman barracks at the time were not far from where the temple was located. I wonder why maybe they decided to do that. So they were soon aware of a problem stirring in that area. And they were quick to be on the scene.

[34:10] When the mob sees the Roman soldiers, they stop beating Paul. And again, just as another side note here, authority is a good thing. And it's good to have authority in place to put an end to people acting crazy like this. We need police to protect us from people who want to act foolishly. Once the Roman soldiers arrived on the scene, no one in the mob was able to really communicate well what they were actually mobbing about. Because the mob was so large and probably because Paul was so badly beaten, the soldiers had to carry him out, physically lift him up out of there. And what we'll see next is more of Paul's courage under pressure. God gave him an audience. And after clearing up some confusion, Lord willing, next week we'll see, and you can go ahead and read ahead if you want to, and I hope that you do, we will see that he is ready for this opportunity to preach the gospel, to give his testimony, to defend the truth of Jesus Christ. So, as you are obedient to the Lord's will for your life, there may be times when people are opposed to that plan for you, whatever it might be. And as we've seen, maybe because they truly care about you and they're concerned about your safety, or sometimes they've just rejected Christ and they see you as an enemy. Whatever the case may be, we trust that, you know, the Lord has commanded us to go and wherever he would have you to go, whatever he would have you to do, whether people understand it or not, we need to be committed.

We need to be ready, as Paul is here, to defend our faith and to communicate the hope that we have in Jesus. Let's pray. Lord, thank you for this time that we've had to be in your word. Lord, thank you for this reminder from your servant, the Apostle Paul, in this situation. Lord, knowing that affliction and imprisonment awaited him in Jerusalem, he was committed to the task that you gave him. He was willing to endure whatever was necessary so that he could preach the truth of who you are and what you've done to as many as possible. Lord, I pray that we would follow the same example in our time, in our place, that, Lord, we would be in your word, that we would be led by your spirit, that we would be obedient, and that we would be willing to pay whatever the cost might be to share the good news of who you are, again, and the hope that we have in you with as many as possible. So, Father, we pray that you would help us to be courageous in our time, and that when you give us an audience and you give us the opportunity that we'd be ready to share the hope that we have in you that endures all things.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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