

Bibles???

The Word of God is the Absolute Truth and the Final Authority

Turn your bibles with me to Acts 23

In our study last week, Paul finally had the opportunity to personally address the Jews in Jerusalem.

This was something that was in the making for over 20 years

He had seen Gentiles across Asia and Macedonia and Greece respond to the gospel message he shared during his three missionary journeys.

Why not his fellow Jew?

Paul felt such a genuine love for the Jews, that he was willing to relinquish his own salvation and spend eternity in hell if somehow that could bring His fellow Jews to faith in Christ!

He was willing even to forfeit his salvation, if, somehow, that could save them from God's condemnation.

So in our study last week, Paul begins to provide his testimony to them, he is speaking to them in Aramaic, everyone is listening intently – and then Paul mentions the word "Gentiles" and chaos erupted.

The Roman soldiers didn't know what Paul said to the crowd to make them act that way –

At first, they were going to beat it out of Paul – but when they found out he was a Roman citizen, they brought him before the Sanhedrin.

For Paul, this is good news – even though he was rejected by the Jews at the temple, he is going to have the opportunity to do it all over again, but this time, he is going the gospel message to the religious rulers.

As I was studying the scriptures yesterday, one of the things we have to remember is that there will be times when we will face persecution and opposition despite being in God's will.

However, He has promised to be next to us and encourage us every step of the way.

Let's pray...

There are many memorable courtroom scenes in movies.

If I was going to list my top 3

3. My Cousin Vinnie

2. A Few Good Men – “You can't handle the truth”

1. And Justice for All (1979) – Al Pacino.

And in the movie, Al Pacino is a defense lawyer who is forced to defend a judge who has been accused of rape.

And after looking at the evidence – he comes to the conclusion that evidence points that the judge is indeed guilty.

But one of the other things he finds out is about the injustice that takes – he realizes that even if he was the worst lawyer, the system is never going to convict one of its own.

So he goes on a rant in the courtroom and screams out “You’re out of order, the whole trial is out of order, they’re out of order”

And as he is being forced out of the courtroom, he shouts, “I have just completed my opening statement.”

And the movie ends

Now, the reason I bring this up is because that is exactly what is going to happen here as Paul stand before the Sanhedrin.

Remember, standing before the Sanhedrin would be the equivalent of you and I standing before congress with the opportunity to share the gospel.

[Act 23:1-11 NKJV] 1 Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men [and] brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."

The fact that Paul addresses the Sanhedrin as men and brethren – this shows an extraordinary amount of boldness – this guy is unafraid of anyone right?

However, later on in our text, we are going to find out that Paul was afraid. We are going to find out that Paul was discouraged.

How do we know?

Because Jesus is going to tell Paul – “to take courage”

So if Paul is afraid and discouraged, how is it that he can speak to the Sanhedrin in this matter?

Turn to the Gospel of Luke 12 – let’s look a promise that Jesus gives to the believer.

[Luk 12:11-12 NKJV] 11 "Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. 12 "For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

So we see the Holy Spirit at work here in the life of Paul as he addresses the Sanhedrin.

He also tells them that he has a good conscious before God

He is not saying that he is perfect – because we know that he was not. (the episode with Stephen and the persecution of the church)

1 Cor 4:4

[1Co 4:4 NKJV] 4 For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.

Church,

The standard for Christians is God's word, which has been given to guide us, instruct us and measure us.

And in God's word we are commanded to: "keep faith and have a clean conscience."

This is something that Paul tells Timothy and Titus in his epistles and us.

And it means that we must learn and apply the Biblical standard to our thoughts, to our choices and to our behavior.

This is especially true today – where we live in a time where the world is calling good – evil and evil good.

Our conscience does not set the standard; God's Word does – our conscience only applies it.

2 And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

According to Jewish historians, Ananias was one of the worst high priests that the Jews ever had.

He was corrupt –

And he orders men to shut Paul up.

Why did he shut Paul up?

Some say it was because Paul spoke before he was addressed

Some say it was because he said that he had a clean conscience

But if you read the book of Acts, one of the things that you will notice is a progression in the refusal of the Sanhedrin to hear the message of grace.

In Acts 4, when Peter and John were arrested, they addressed the Sanhedrin and they responded by warning Peter and John not to talk about Jesus anymore

In Acts 5, Peter and John are arrested again, they address the Sanhedrin and they are beaten and released

In Acts 6 and 7, Stephen addresses the Sanhedrin and they murder him

Here in chapter 23, they will no longer listen

After so many attempts by God to show them grace and offer them forgiveness, they had come to an end.

Their hearts were set in stone

Church, there comes a point in the lives of people and nations where they cement their hearts so much against the Gospel that they will not hear it anymore.

We don't always know when that point is, but it happens.

Psalm 95 – we have the warning

Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts

That is what happened to the Sanhedrin.

3 Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, [you] whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?"

Paul is calling the High Priest here a hypocrite.

Turn to Matt 23 – we will see Jesus use the same term.

[Mat 23:27-28 NKJV] 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead [men's] bones and all uncleanness. 28 "Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

According to Jewish law, Numbers 19 –

One would be considered unclean if someone came in contact with a dead body or someone's grave.

So it would be uncommon to be walking across a field and coming in contact with a tomb that might have been covered by brush.

So people began to paint the tombs white – to make them clearly visible.

Now Jesus compares the Pharisees and the scribes to the whitewash tombs.

They present themselves to be self-righteous on the outside – but on the inside they are spiritually dead.

That is the same thing that Paul is doing here as he responds to being wacked in the mouth.

These religious rulers are supposed to adhere to the law –

And according to the law, Deut 25, stated that it was only after a person was found guilty, he was then allowed to be struck.

Paul hasn't been found guilty of anything.

4 And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" 5 Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.' "

Paul is apologizing here –

He is informed that he just called the high priest a whitewash wall.

And his response – I didn't know it was him.

There are some bible scholars that believe that Paul didn't know that Ananias was the High Priest because he had been gone for so long.

Remember, it was over 20 years since Paul was a Pharisee

Others point out that Paul didn't know he was dressing the high priest because the scriptures point out that Paul had bad eyesight.

[Gal 4:15-16 NKJV] 15 What then was the blessing you [enjoyed]? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me. 16 Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?

[Gal 6:11 NKJV] 11 See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!

At the end of the book of Romans – we find out that Paul dictated the letter and Tertius wrote it.

6 But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men [and] brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and **resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"**

Here in verse 6, it was apparently clear to Paul that God was closing the door in his conversation with the Sanhedrin, no one was going to listen.

So, since there was no preaching left to do that day, Paul brought the scene to an end.

Remember, moments earlier – all eyes were on him after what he called the high priest.

So Paul brings up the topic of the resurrection

Again, this would be like me standing before congress and everyone appears to be angry at me – and then I make the statement, “Hey, let’s talk about global warming or let’s talk about the 2nd Amendment”

7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. 8 For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection--and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both.

The Sadducees denied the supernatural.

They only believed in the first five books of the bible.

They believed there was no heaven, no hell, they didn’t even think humans had a spirit!

They believed there was a God but that He didn’t care what you did, as there were no punishments or rewards after death.

The Pharisees, they believed in the authority of the entire Old Testament Scriptures.

They believed in the miraculous, including the resurrection.

There problem was that they added the traditions of man to what the scriptures declared.

So, what Paul did – he split them.

It took a single word “resurrection” for them to break out in violent opposition to each other.

Now compare this to what we read back in Acts 15, the Jerusalem council.

There, the Church gathered to settle and bridge this serious rift between points of view.

And it was done without violence and without hatred.

That’s what God does when He is in charge of hearts.

He brings peace and grace to His Church.

9 Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God."

The scribes – these were the lawyers and the interpreters of the law – they are the first one to come to Paul’s defense.

And they want to follow the same advice that Gamaliel had given the Sanhedrin 20 years earlier when they were being addressed by Peter and John.

[Act 5:38-39 NKJV] 38 "And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; 39 "but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it--lest you even be found to fight against God."

10 Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring [him] into the barracks.

Here we have the commander,

Last week, he saw the Jewish crowd respond violently when Paul brought up the word, gentiles.

Here, he sees the Sanhedrin start fighting among each other when the word resurrection is mentioned.

He sees the infighting among the Sanhedrin and he thinks that they are going to kill Paul

And since Paul had disclosed to him in our last chapter that he was a Roman citizen.

The commander had a responsibility to protect Paul.

So he orders Roman soldiers to go in and rescue Paul and put him in jail.

11 But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome."

As Paul is sitting down in his jail cell, he was probably thinking about what a great failure he had been.

He had failed at the thing he most wanted to do.

The Jews at the temple didn't respond to his short sermon and he was only able to speak his opening statement to the Sanhedrin before he was punched in the face and then he responded with insulting the high priest.

And now he finds himself in jail – probably thinking that his ministry is now over.

Now, previously in the book of Acts, we had seen Paul miraculously delivered from jail cells before.

But this time, notice that the Lord met Paul right there in the jail cell.

Church, many times, we often demand that the Lord will deliver us out of our circumstances, when He really wants to meet us right in the midst of our circumstances.

God met Paul in the darkness and brings him the strength and encouragement he needs.

Did Jesus reprimand Paul for losing his cool against the Sanhedrin – no

He tells Paul – be of good cheer.

“Paul – you did exactly what I called you to do and that was to testify/ to bear witness of Me”

You see, the Lord’s goal for Paul’s life was not for him to reform the Sanhedrin.

It was to present salvation to those that God brought in his path.

Church, as believers, we don’t work on commission.

We have been commissioned to make disciples.

We don’t save

We don’t win people to the Lord

The Lord only requires that we witness.

The result of the witness is in His hands.

We can't change a person's heart.

We can tell a person about what Jesus has done for them and what Jesus will do for them if they accept Him – but the acceptance or rejection is totally up to the individual.

And I think it is important to recognize that when our witness is rejected, it is not a rejection of us – it is a rejection of Jesus Christ.

Paul had testified of Jesus Christ

He was faithful

Was there riots? Yes

Did they try to kill him? Yes

But he did it and he was faithful and that is what the Lord required.

And because he was faithful, the Lord assured him of the future.

“Paul, you testified about Me, let's do this again – you are going to Rome”

Think about what it means for Paul

- He is encouraged because God is still going to use him. He has been given a new commission – he is going to the capital of the world – Rome.

- He is also encouraged because he knows that he is not going to die there in the prison in Jerusalem. If the Lord said he is going to Rome – then, he is going to Rome.

Now - he only knows where he is going.

He is never told how he is going to get there or even the timeline of when he is going to get there.

You see, here is the important thing to remember, being in God's will doesn't mean that the road will not be difficult.

In fact, we will see the hardships begin for Paul the very next morning – and we will see that next week.

Let's pray...

To Receive Christ do the following:

Admit, "I am a sinner."

Confess and be willing to turn from your sin.

Believe, by faith that Jesus Christ died for you on the cross.

Receive, through prayer, Jesus Christ into your heart and receive eternal life.

Dear Lord Jesus,

I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins. Please forgive me for my sins and cleanse me by Your blood. I accept You by faith as my personal Lord and Savior. Give me a thirst for Your Word and Help me to follow You all of my days. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

[Num 6:24-26 NLT] 24 '

May the LORD bless you and protect you.

May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you.

May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace.'

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