

Paul at Jerusalem - Part III
Paul Speaks to the Sanhedrin
(Acts 23:1-11)

Introduction:

1. The commander (Lysias) realized that the charges against Paul were not a violation of Roman law, but he still had an unruly crowd that was bent on having Paul killed.
 - His next best option is to have Paul brought before the Sanhedrin since they were the “allowed” ruling body over Jewish affairs.
 - The Jews would still have to prove Paul was guilty of a crime and should they do so then Paul could be examined further by the Roman governor. (See Acts 23:26-30)
 - 1) The reality is – Paul was not in violation of Jewish Law but he would remain under the control of the Roman authorities because Lysias feared for Paul’s life should he release him.
 - 2) The continued hearings that Paul has before the Roman governor Felix and the subsequent Roman officials (Festus and Agrippa) does not mean that Paul was guilty of any crime – but shows the providence of God in protecting Paul from harm just as He said He would. (Acts 23:11)
2. Paul’s meeting with the Sanhedrin was brief but volatile and it revealed their vehement opposition to the Gospel, their outright denial of Jesus Christ and their hatred for those who preached about Him.

3. The opposition to the Gospel from the first century Jews was nothing new to the church or to Paul:

- We see it at the Day of _____ where the church had its beginning, the apostles were baptized in the Holy Spirit, and miracles were performed. The Jews who witnessed this mocked them and accused them of being drunk. (Acts 2:13)
- After _____ healed the lame man and subsequently preached the Gospel – he was thrown in jail and told not to preach about Jesus. (Acts 3:12-26)
- In Acts 5, the _____ were once again arrested for preaching the Gospel and told to stop by the Sanhedrin. They even had them beaten and it did not deter them.
- Then a man named _____ preached a compelling message for the Jews to repent (Acts 6-7) and embrace Jesus Christ as Savior, but instead of doing so they had him killed.
- The _____ at large was persecuted (Acts 8)
- The Apostle _____ was executed by Herod and the Apostle _____ went into hiding. (Acts 12:1-3, 17)
- After a divine appointment on the road to Damascus, the Apostle _____ became a preacher (evangelist) of the Gospel and faced numerous opposition from the Jews:
 - 1) At Cyprus, Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium and Derbe
 - 2) At Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth
 - 3) At Ephesus and again at Corinth
 - 4) And finally at Jerusalem where he now faces what seems to be his greatest opposition.

4. A few interesting bits of information about Paul's meeting with the Sanhedrin:
- It does not appear to be a formal trial:
 - 1) There were no charges made against Paul
 - 2) There were no witnesses that were brought forward to testify against Paul
 - 3) The meeting does not appear to have taken place on the temple grounds
 - Here is another opportunity for the members of the Sanhedrin to repent and embrace Jesus Christ as Savior and you would think they would.....but they don't!
 - 1) Prior to this meeting there are at least 4 recorded instances where the Sanhedrin met to evaluate the claims of Christ (Mark 14:53-65, Acts 4:5-22, Acts 5:21-42, Acts 6:12-15) and in each of those cases they rejected Him.
 - 2) Some conclude that their rejection of Jesus as Messiah was in many ways a symbolic rejection of Jesus by all the unbelieving Jews.
 - 3) The undisputable fact is the city of Jerusalem is destroyed by Titus in A.D. 70 and the Jews will suffer further captivity. After a second and final revolt in A.D. 135; the Jews will find themselves displaced throughout the Roman Empire without a place to call home....and this will remain the case until 1948 and they (the Jews) continue to fight for their survival.
 - 4) Is it possible that their rejection of Jesus brings about this judgment?

- The Sanhedrin was the religious ruling body over the Jews in Roman occupied Israel and its primary authority was over matters related to Jewish law with some limited authority in civil matters as far as was permitted by the Roman governors and officials of the region.
 - The Sanhedrin consisted of three main groups:
 - 1) The **High Priests** which included the current president of the Sanhedrin, past presidents and officials (i.e. captain of the temple guard) and others who were descendants of the high priestly order.
 - 2) **Elders** (i.e. Nicodemus) and other wealthy individuals (i.e. Joseph of Arimathea).
 - 3) **Scribes**
 - The two main religious factions consisted of:
 - 1) The _____
 - 2) The _____
5. What observations and conclusions can we draw from all of this information:
- Since Paul had committed no crime against Rome; he should have been a free man that day.
 - The Sanhedrin had no real authority to put Paul on trial because Paul had already proven he had not violated Jewish law.
 - The only remaining thing left for the Sanhedrin to do was to reject the claims of Paul and thus reject Jesus (in the same way they did at the trial of Jesus), and set in motion a plan to have Paul killed. God will of course intervene but let's see how things unfold!

Paul Confronts the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:1)

1. Luke tells us that; “Paul looked intently at the council” which seems to show that he was not willing to be intimidated by them or acquiesce to their false charges.
 - A typical response from those who teach error is to intimidate, shout over, or bully the person into submission – and Paul (innocent of any wrongdoing) was not going to let them use this technique, nor was he going to allow them to charge him falsely.
 - The meaning of the word (*atenzio*) is to “**stare**” or “**gaze upon**”; which could mean that Paul was letting them know (by giving them a stern look) that he had complete confidence in God and he was not afraid of them since he was simply not guilty. **In other words Paul spoke through his eyes!**
2. Paul addresses them as “Brethren” which probably means he was identifying with them as an equal.
 - Paul was a Pharisee and once a probable member of the Sanhedrin. He had been trained along side of many of them under the tutelage of Gamaliel.
 - At one time Paul (prior to embracing Christ as Savior) even worked with some of them in an attempt to destroy the Christian Church. (Acts 26:10)
3. Paul makes this claim to the Sanhedrin; “I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day”
 - This claim is more than likely addressed to the false charges brought against Paul in which he is clearly innocent.
 - Paul’s assertion of a “clear conscience” puts the Sanhedrin on the defensive for he is in essence stating they are the ones fighting against God.

4. How could Paul claim that he lived with a perfectly good conscience?
- To the false charges by the Sanhedrin there was no doubt that Paul could assert there was no motive of wrong doing on his part.
 - What about the times when Paul was attempting to bring Christians to trial and even have them killed? How could Paul's conscience be clear under those circumstances?
5. Here are a few interesting thoughts regarding the human conscience from John MacArthur's Commentary on Acts (page 280) as well as his book titles "**The Vanishing Conscience**":
- "Conscience is the faculty that passes moral judgment on a persons actions (Romans 2:14-15). But it does so based only on the highest standards of morality and conduct perceived by that individual. It is neither the voice of God nor infallible. A conscience uninformed by biblical truth will not necessarily pass accurate judgment (see I Corinthians 4:4). Before his conversion Paul had not."
 - It is possible for the conscience to be damaged, dysfunctional, and even destroyed". The Bible speaks of:
 - 1) "A weak conscience" (I Cor. 8:7, 10)
 - 2) "A wounded conscience" (I Cor. 8:12)
 - 3) "A defiled conscience" (Titus 1:15)
 - 4) "An evil conscience" (Hebrews 10:22)
 - 5) "The worst of all is a seared conscience" (I Tim. 4:2)

- The Christian can “strengthen their conscience by constantly exposing themselves to the truths of Scripture” by striving towards:
 - 1) A good conscience (I Timothy 1:5, 19, Hebrews 13:18, I Peter 3:16, 21)
 - 2) A blameless conscience (Acts 24:16)
 - 3) A clear conscience (I Tim. 3:9, II Tim. 1:3)
6. The reason that Paul could make such a claim was because he had a “spiritually healthy” conscience. (Hebrews 9:14, Hebrews 10:22)
- Paul’s life had been transformed and as such his pursuit of biblical righteousness allowed him to make this claim. He could state that his motives were pure and his actions were right.
 - The members of the Sanhedrin on the other hand were offended at such a statement because it revealed they were at fault and thus they became defensive. They then set out to do what their conscience dictated which was to try and destroy Paul and the message he proclaimed.
7. What a sad reminder at how mankind can be presented with the truth and yet still reject it! (John 8:12-59)
- The Sanhedrin will set out to try and further discredit Paul but will not be successful and then will attempt to have Paul killed.
 - God will intervene and in His providence will protect Paul by securing him in the care of the Roman government.
 - Let’s see how the members of the Sanhedrin try to deal with Paul’s claim of an “innocent conscience”.

The Sanhedrin Wrestles with the Conflict (Acts 23:2-5)

1. The high priest named Ananias appears to be enraged at Paul's claim of a clear conscience – so he orders him to be struck (*tupto*) on the mouth.
 - A little background on this Ananias fella:
 - 1) He is not the same Ananias who helped Paul shortly after his conversion (See Acts 9:17-19). He also should not be confused with the high priest Annas (see Luke 3:2)
 - 2) This Ananias was a wicked and corrupt religious leader who stole from the offerings, and brought harm to any who opposed him. According to Josephus; because he was a friend to the Roman occupiers, he was eventually killed by Jewish rebels – so he received his just reward.
 - This striking on the mouth was probably more than just a mere slap on the face.
 - 1) The Greek word (*tupto*) is the same word used in Acts 21:32, and Matt. 27:30 and it means a “beating”.
 - 2) This clear violation of Jewish law caused Paul to be angry and he responds in an inappropriate manner toward Ananias and the others.
2. It is true that Paul had not been found guilty of any crime and therefore he should not have been struck/beaten according to Jewish law.
 - This was not the first time that a follower of Christ had been treated unfairly for their testimony of Christ.
 - Paul's response was completely accurate but the other members of the Sanhedrin reminded Paul of the position of respect that the high priest demanded and that is why Paul felt the need to apologize.

3. Let's examine Paul's response; "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?"
- Ezekiel used this same basic phrase in his description of the false prophets in his day; "It is definitely because they have misled My people by saying, Peace! When there is no peace. And when anyone builds a wall, behold they plaster it over with whitewash.....thus I will spend My wrath on the wall and those who have plastered it over with whitewash; and I will say to you, the wall is gone and its plasters are gone, along with the prophets of Israel who prophesy to Jerusalem, and who see visions of peace for her when there is no peace, declares the Lord" (Ezekiel 13:10-16)
 - Jesus also described the Pharisees this way; "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matthew 23:27)
 - Paul's response was accurate but apparently it was how he said it, and the perception by those who heard it was that it was disrespectful to the office and position of the high priest. (Exodus 22:28)
 - 1) This response shows Paul's humanity and that even he was capable of doing wrong. (Romans 7:14-21)
 - 2) Paul clearly teaches that we are to obey those who rule over us (Romans 13), so when confronted with his error he did the right thing and apologized.
 - In fairness to Paul; it appears that he did not recognize the high priest (perhaps because the high priest did not have the appropriate priestly garments) – but when he was confronted with his error he apologized which showed Paul's humility, obedience and his willingness to take the high road.

The Sanhedrin Divides – Over the Resurrection (Acts 23:6-10)

1. Paul makes a claim that the true reason that he is on trial was because of his belief in Christ, and that he preaches about the “hope of the resurrection”. (Acts 23:6)
2. This claim created a real dilemma and a division among the **Sanhedrin**:
 - The **Pharisee’s** believed in a resurrection of the dead
 - 1) This led some Pharisee’s (i.e. Nicodemus) to embrace the belief in Christ as Messiah – the One who conquered death and provided the hope of resurrection.
 - 2) Other Pharisee’s (though they believed in the resurrection) still rejected the teaching that Jesus was the Messiah – though many (over the early first century) did come to faith in Christ.
 - The other group known as the **Sadducee’s** did not believe in a resurrection.
 - 1) They did not believe in the spirit world, angels or the afterlife. They held only to the teachings of the Pentateuch (The first five Books of the Bible).
 - 2) This denial of the resurrection put them at odds with the Pharisee’s and it resulted (as was in this case) in an argument and debate over the issue.
3. This bitter dispute between the two groups threw the entire meeting into confusion and it resulted (ironically) in the Pharisee’s defending Paul against the Sadducee’s.
4. The Roman commander (Lysias) determined that Paul was in danger so he once again took him back to the Roman barracks in the hopes that he could sort things out in what to do with Paul. (Acts 23:10)

Paul receives Comfort and Confirmation from the Lord (Acts 23:11)

1. While waiting in the barracks of Fort Antonia he no doubt was wandering what would be the outcome.
2. We don't really know the state of mind that Paul was in, but the Lord appeared to Paul in a vision to bring comfort to Paul:
 - This was the _____ recorded vision in which the Lord appeared to Paul (Acts 9:4-6, Acts 16:9, Acts 18:9-10)
 - The Lord tells Paul – “take courage”
 - 1) His task in Jerusalem was complete!
 - 2) He informs Paul that his life will be spared and he would go to Rome to continue the proclamation of the gospel.
3. Paul had the right outlook on life:
 - To the Corinthians Paul had already wrote these words; “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ”. (II Corinthians 1:3-5)
 - To the Philippians Paul would later write these words; “According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:20-21)

Concluding Remarks:

1. Isn't it awesome to see how God works – and how Paul clearly understood that his life was in God's hands?
2. Our next lesson will reveal that even though Paul had complete confidence in God to deliver him – the evil forces were still at work to try and stop the continuation of the spread of the gospel.
 - Satan doesn't want God's plan to succeed and somehow in his twisted mind he has convinced himself and others that he will defeat God – but we know better!
 - A plan (conspiracy) is put in place to have Paul killed – but little did they know that this plan would fail.
 - Not only would the plan fail but it created an opportunity for Paul to appear before some very influential political leaders and present the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them.
 - This series of events would eventually lead Paul to Rome where some of his greatest accomplishments for Christ will be made. The impact that Paul makes on Rome will be seen later through the first several centuries and that impact continues to this day!
 - That is why Paul could write these words to the Roman people; “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28)
3. How about you – how strong is your confidence in God?