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SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

ACTS CHAPTER 23

“A DAY IN COURT”

What a day it was! Paul, who the day before had been rescued by Roman soldiers from a crazed mob of Jews bent upon killing him, was brought before the supreme court of the Jews. They demanded an explanation for the uproar caused by his presence in the City of Peace, which had never been very peaceful.

Paul, a Jew who had previously been authorized by the Sanhedrin court to kill Christians; Paul, who had recently become a Christian, was now hauled before this tribunal and treated like a common criminal. This seventy member court was composed of high priests, Pharisees, Sadducees and representatives of various other minor parties.

The chapter begins with Paul permitted to speak in his own defense. He began by basically saying, “I’m not guilty!”

I’m Innocent!

“Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, “Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.” (Acts 23:1)

As a Pharisee who was, *“touching the righteousness which is in the Law, blameless”* (Phil. 3:6) he was conscious of no defect or guilt before God respecting the Law. From the beginning of his Jewish religious life he had acted in accordance with his convictions. From the beginning of his Christian life he had steadfastly pursued the path in which God had directed him to walk. He later said, *“I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.”* (Acts 24:16)

Tempers Flare

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

“Hit Him!” said the high priest. Hitting on the mouth was a means of silencing a speaker for saying what was thought to be false. (See John 18:22) Paul was physically assaulted and publicly insulted which was a violation of Jewish Law which, like the law of our land, holds that a person is innocent until proven guilty.

The high priest hastily judged Paul as being a liar for he could not conceive how anyone could have a clean conscience for, as history shows, his conscience was defiled. Yet, he was sitting in judgment upon Paul before Paul had an opportunity to present his case. Ananias was an unjust judge for Leviticus 19:35 says, *“You shall do no injustice in judgment....”* This

priest and the Sanhedrin had already pre-judged Paul, so what chance did he have of receiving a fair hearing?

Hypocrite!

“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?” And those who stood by said, “Do you revile God’s high priest?” 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.’” (vs.3-5)

Paul was really calling the high priest a hypocrite by using the phrase “a whitened wall” or “white-washed wall.” The sepulchers in the cemeteries were white-washed with a mixture of lime and water. They were white-washed on the outside but were not washed white on the inside! They were full of dead-men’s bones. Our Saviour used a similar expression to describe the hypocritical character of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:27-39.

The high priest, while he pretended to sit there to see that justice was done, prejudiced the “jury” by commanding Paul to be struck in violation of the Law. He certainly was not impartial. This man’s character was not what he professed it to be. In fact, he had a long history of malpractice.

His reputation was not good and, according to history, that is a generous statement. Ananias had been the high priests for 10 years. He was corrupt and violent. Josephus, the Jewish historian, reports that Ananias illegally confiscated from the threshing floors of farmers, that which was supposed to maintain common local priests. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20:206) Other historians say that he was “haughty, gluttonous and a rapacious man.” (Renan) He is an example of corrupt ecclesiasticism, which unfortunately exists in an even greater measure in our day.

Was Paul angry? I suppose it depends upon one’s perspective. There is a difference between “righteous indignation” and anger. Paul’s sudden reaction was the result of a legitimate human instinct. But notice that Paul did not retaliate any further. He turned the entire matter over to *“him who judges righteously.”* (1 Peter 2:23) And God did judge him for he was killed in A.D. 66 by a man wielding a dagger.

Regarding this issue with Paul we need to consider other texts. Remember that Jesus spoke very strongly against the Jewish authorities in Matthew 23, but Jesus also submitted to the authorities. We can also consider how Stephen spoke to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7. He was by no means genteel and personable.

Paul’s temper was understandably aroused by the brutality and injustice of Ananias. Perhaps afterward he wished he had not said what he said. However he acknowledged his rapid remonstrance. To acknowledge one’s error is a mark of humility. It is doubtful that Paul gained anything by his apology since the court was stacked against him in the first place.

Paul said that he did not know that Ananias was the high priest. (23:5) Paul had been away from Jerusalem for a number of years and may not have known that Ananias was the high

priest. Also, he may not have been wearing his official at priestly garments for if he had been one would think that Paul would have recognized him from his attire.

Divide & Conquer

The real reason why some of the Sanhedrin members wanted to eradicate Paul was not that he had taken a Gentile into the temple, for they knew by now that he had not done that or that he had been engaged in anti-Jewish teaching. What really irked and infuriated them was the teaching of Paul and other Christians the inflammatory doctrine of the resurrection. If a person believed in the resurrection, then it was possible to believe the claim that Jesus arose from the dead. If they allowed this teaching to continue then people would eventually believe that Jesus was who He claimed to be and that would certainly throw a monkey wrench into the machinery of their religious system.

Paul's quick mind and ready wit seized upon a doctrine which was shared in common by the Pharisees but was rejected by the Sadducees. He took advantage of this strong difference between the two groups and announced, "*concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!*" (v.6)

A risen, living Lord Jesus Christ would prove the following:

- That He is the Messiah, Lord, Savior and King! (Acts 2:24-36)
- That salvation is found nowhere else and in no one else. (Acts 4:10-12)
- That He is Prince and Savior. (Acts 5:29-32)
- That through Him sins are forgiven which is something that the Law can never promise or provide. (Acts 13:37-39)
- That Jesus Christ is God's appointed Judge of the world. (Acts 17:31)

What the resurrection says about Jesus Christ is undeniable and cannot be ignored. When confronted with this dynamic truth persons must make a decision and some decide to react violently, as did members of the Sanhedrin court.

When Paul dropped the "resurrection" bomb, immediately the council was divided for the Pharisees believed in a resurrection, even though their idea of a resurrection was more of an ethereal concept than a literal bodily resurrection, but the Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection. The council was thrown into dissension and confusion. The gentlemen of the jury were yelling at each other. The Pharisees became more intent on defending their concept of the resurrection than they were in defeating the apostle Paul.

The Sanhedrin never did come to a conclusion and announce a verdict because of the division created when Paul spoke of the resurrection. Claudius Lysias saved Paul's skin by forcefully removing him from the Sanhedrin court so that he didn't get torn apart by these zealots for he was responsible for Paul's safety. Paul was taken to the Tower of Antonia to await another day before the court.

The Great Physician Makes a House Call

That night Paul had surprise visit from his Master, Whom he served and Who said, "*I am with you always...*" (Matt. 28:20) In one of Paul's darkest nights, the Lord Jesus visited Paul, re-energizing him for further work. The Great Physician Who heals the brokenhearted, encourages the distressed and uplifts the downcast, visited Paul. "*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."* (v.11)

Jesus gave Paul a fourfold reassurance:

- First, He assured Paul that He was with him;
- Second, He informed Paul that he had fulfilled his purpose for Him Jerusalem: "*you have testified for Me in Jerusalem*";
- Third, He revealed to him the next chapter in this unfolding drama - that he would go to Rome;
- Fourth, that meant that Paul would not be killed in Jerusalem for there was more ministry ahead for him.

This was exactly what Paul needed to hear and his spirit soared. We too need to reckon upon the promise that "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*" (Psalm 46:1) His presence comforted Paul, His promise cheered Paul and His plan challenged Paul.

Beware! Ambush!

Meanwhile out in the dark alleys of Jerusalem there were 40 bandits who bound themselves by an oath to kill Paul. In this dramatic development we see the providence of God intervening to save Paul's life. Paul had a sister in Jerusalem and her son overheard the plot against Paul's life and told Paul about it. Paul sent him to tell the Roman commander how they had schemed to ambush him and the conspiracy was defeated.

God had told Paul that he would go to Rome and here we see that "all things were working together" and the situation was well in hand -- God's hand! Isn't it interesting how God in his sovereignty works everything according to the purposes of his will"? What are the odds of Paul's nephew "just happening, by chance," to overhear the plotters? This was a case of "relative" assistance!

By the way, a question: Why didn't Paul stay with his sister in Jerusalem instead of with Mnason? (21:16) Perhaps she was not a believer; maybe she did not have room in her home; perhaps her husband objected or, perhaps Paul wanted to shield her from any retaliation that might be directed at her and the family because of the animosity against him. For whatever reason, Paul lodged with Mnason. However, it is obvious from the context that her son knew that uncle Paul was in town.

Getting Out Of Town

When Paul's nephew informed of the Roman commander about the plot to kill Paul (23:16) he quickly arranged to transport him from Jerusalem to Caesarea, 40 miles away, the location of

the Roman government court. The Lord used Roman horses for Paul to ride upon and Roman soldiers to protect him. Paul left Jerusalem in style. He left Jerusalem for the last time surrounded by about 500 Roman soldiers. There were two centurions – a centurion was in charge of 100 soldiers; 70 horsemen, 200 spearmen, totaling just under 500 persons to accompany Paul to Caesarea where Felix, the governor was situated. Felix is the Governor who replaced Pontius Pilate.

The Roman Centurion, Claudius Lysias, composed a letter to Felix and in it he states why he was sending Paul to Felix. Lysias could not understand the exact nature of the charges against Paul, although he knew that they had reference to the Jewish Law, and was satisfied that what they accused Paul of was not worthy either of death or of imprisonment.

Being a Roman citizen put Paul under the jurisdiction of the Roman Court at Caesarea. Paul had stayed a few days with Philip the Evangelist on his way up to Jerusalem. Did he know that Paul was returning to Caesarea as a prisoner of the Roman government?

What strange days the last few had been in Paul's life! He had been falsely accused, His testimony before the Sanhedrin had been interrupted, he was physically assaulted, publicly insulted, justice was denied him, he had been forcibly extricated from Jerusalem and taken by an army escort to Caesarea – how do you think Paul felt?

I believe that he was at peace and rather enjoyed it all. After all, Jesus had appeared to him the night before and propped him up on the leaning side! There is never a dull moment while aggressively pursuing God's will for your life.

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