

Introduction

1. We are in the last third of Acts which focuses on the time between Paul's arrest in Jerusalem and his arrival in Rome; it's a time span of about four years
2. If you remember from the past few weeks, Paul is in Jerusalem and has just been brutally attacked by the Jews, false accused by them, arrested by the Roman commander, and narrowly escaped being horrendously tortured through scourging
3. Throughout this ordeal, we have seen how Paul responded to this unjust persecution and I highlighted three of them in our lesson last week:
 - a. He did not allow fear or the threat of persecution to deter him from his mission: even though he knew through the Holy Spirit and the prophecy of Agabus the persecution that awaited him in Jerusalem, he went anyway
 - b. He turned most situations—even persecution—into opportunities to advance the Gospel: we saw this when he begged the commander for an opportunity to address the angry mob
 - c. He exercised his legal rights as a Roman citizen: it was illegal to arrest, bind, and scourge a Roman citizen prior to being found guilty through trial, and Paul took advantage of this right when the Roman commander attempted to torture him
4. In our passage today, Paul is still in Jerusalem and appears before the Sanhedrin at the request of the Roman commander:
 - a. If you remember, the Roman commander had ordered Paul to be taken to the barracks to be interrogated by being scourged so that he could supposedly **"find out the reason why [the Jews] were shouting against him"** (22:24)
 - b. Essentially, the commander assumed Paul was the guilty party and was intent on forcing him to confess
 - c. However, upon learning that he was a Roman citizen, the commander and his centurions were immediately fearful and put an end to what they were planning
 - d. This leads us to the last verse of chapter 22 where we see the commander sets up a more formal inquiry (READ 22:30):
 - 1) Now that he realizes Paul is a Roman citizen, he is more interested in knowing **"for certain"** why Paul had been accused by the Jews
 - 2) He orders the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin (Council), to convene the next day
 - 3) He even **"released"** Paul his chains and set him before the Council to testify
5. I believe that what we see next by Paul is a Biblical example of how to bear witness of the Gospel before a hostile audience:
 - a. Paul was confident
 - b. He was contrite
 - c. He was clever
 - d. And, he was courageous

A. Paul was confident (READ 23:1)

1. Paul looked deliberately and directly at the Council (1a):
 - a. Luke describes Paul **"looking intently"** at his accusers

- b. Versions of this phrase are used at least eight times in the New Testament and describe looking or gazing at someone or something directly and deliberately
 - 1) It's used to describe how the Apostles were gazing up into the sky at Jesus ascension (Acts 1:10)
 - 2) It's used to describe how Stephen looked up into heaven when he was murdered (Acts 7:55)
 - 3) James even uses it to describe looking into the Word of God and obeying it (James 1:25)
 - c. Luke's description of Paul looking intently—directly and deliberately—at the council is an indication of the confidence Paul had before his accusers
2. Another sign of Paul's confidence was that he appealed to the members of the Sanhedrin as an equal, not as a subordinate (1b):
- a. Twice in this passage Paul refers to them as "**brethren**" (here and v. 6):
 - 1) This could simply be because he shared a common Jewish heritage with them
 - 2) However, the Sanhedrin was made up Pharisees and Sadducees and Paul himself was a Pharisee, in fact he came from a line of Pharisee ("**a descendant of pharisees**"; 6)
 - 3) He had even been trained by one of the greatest Jewish religious scholars in history, Gamaliel (v. 3), and had "**advanced in Judaism beyond many**" of his contemporaries (Galatians 1:14)
 - b. Paul had no reason to feel inferior to his accusers simply because they held a position of authority; in fact, he had every reason to see himself as their equal
3. A third and final sign of Paul's confidence was his appeal to his clear conscience before God (RE-READ 1c):
- a. Later in his trial before Felix Paul said, "**I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men**" (Acts 24:16)
 - b. In 2 Timothy 1:3 he wrote, "**I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did...**"
 - c. Notice that in all three of these passages Paul's primary concern is having a clear conscience before God
 - d. Some time ago I was confronting an acquaintance over something and he replied, "**My conscience is clear**" but it was obvious he simply meant that he didn't feel guilty about it; it wasn't an honest assessment as to how God saw his behavior
 - e. For Paul, however, it was ALWAYS about how God viewed his behavior since God was the one who would examine him (READ 1 Corinthians 4:2-4)
 - f. Paul could address the Sanhedrin with confidence because he had maintained a "**perfectly good conscience before God up to this day**"
4. Takeaway: When we face persecution, we should face it with confidence just as Paul did:
- a. We need not be ashamed and should be able to look directly and deliberately at our accusers—Paul wrote to Timothy, "**Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God**" (2 Timothy 1:8)
 - b. We are not second-class citizens, nor should we see ourselves as—we not only have the God-given right and commission to preach the Gospel, but the Constitutional right as well

- c. What we should remember most of all, however, is that our goal isn't to be found innocent by men, but to maintain a clear conscience before God

B. Paul was contrite (READ 23:2-5)

1. David wrote in Psalm 51:17, **“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”**
2. If we allow this Psalm to define for us what it means to have a contrite heart, it means that we recognize and experience remorse over our own sin, are willing to confess it, and then allow the Lord to create within us a clean heart and steadfast spirit to serve and obey Him
3. This is precisely what we see here in Paul when Ananias orders him to struck in the face:
 - a. What do we know about Ananias?
 - 1) He was the high priest from AD 47 to approx. AD 58/59
 - 2) He was a supporter of Rome, and it ultimately led to his assassination by an anti-Roman zealot named Memahem in AD 66
 - 3) According to historian Josephus, he had a reputation for being insolent (overly rude and disrespectful) and quick tempered
 - 4) We see that temper here when almost immediately after Paul opens his mouth, he orders for him to be struck in the face
 - b. Paul's response is a challenge to interpret:
 - 1) He certainly had the right to be angry and call out the High Priest for his unlawful behavior; the Law had provisions against injustice in judgement (e.g. Leviticus 19:15)
 - 2) Likewise, calling Ananias a **“whitewashed wall”** was accurate:
 - a) A whitewashed wall was one that had been painted over to hide the fact that it was in poor shape
 - b) Jesus used similar language regarding the Pharisees (Matthew 23:27): **“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.”**
 - c) It was an idiom describing hypocrisy, and in this case aptly fit Ananias because he held the position of High Priest and righteous judge, but failed to obey the very Law he was bound to enforce
 - 3) Paul was also correct in declaring that God was going to strike down Ananias—he was assassinated just a few years later
 - 4) The challenge comes in Paul's response to the accusation that he **“revile[d] God's High Priest”** (RE-READ 4-5):
 - a) To revile means to insult or abuse someone
 - b) Paul's reply suggests that he unknowingly violated the Law by speaking evil of one of Israel's rulers because he didn't know Ananias was the High Priest; in other words, Paul was admitting to wrongdoing, though out of ignorance
 - c) Some scholars argue against this view claiming that Paul certainly would have known the High Priest, and therefore was using irony to further condemn Ananias: **“I didn't know that HE was the High Priest”** (e.g. almost mocking him because of his failure to act like a high priest)
 - d) That argument falls flat because it can't explain Paul's quoting of the Law

- c. As much as we love to put Paul on a pedestal, he wasn't sinless or perfect (see Romans 7 as proof); but, he was contrite:
 - 1) What he said of Ananias was true—God would strike down Ananias; he was a whitewashed wall; and he did violate the Law
 - 2) But Paul appears to admit that something about his response was inappropriate—maybe it was his tone of his voice or the way he said it
 - 3) Whatever it was, admitting it reveals that Paul had a contrite heart; he apparently wasn't afraid to confess when he was wrong
- 4. Takeaway: in the face of persecution, we should be bold but avoid sin, and when we fail we should demonstrate a contrite heart

C. Paul was clever (READ 23:6-10)

- 1. Did you catch what Paul did here?
- 2. He's looking around and sees that there are Pharisees on one side and Sadducees on the other side, and he's fully aware of the differences in their theology:
 - a. The Pharisees believed in life after death (resurrection), angels, and other spiritual beings
 - b. The Sadducees, however, rejected all of these
- 3. So, Paul does something really clever—he shouts, **“Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!”**
- 4. Now, why would he do this?
 - a. He knew these parties well enough to know that they would begin to argue over whether the dead could be resurrected
 - b. He may have also hoped that as a Pharisee himself, he would garner support among some of the other Pharisees
 - c. We see that both of these things actually happen—they started arguing among themselves with some of the Pharisees declaring that Paul had done nothing wrong, and some even conceded the possibility that Paul might have heard from a spirit or an angel
 - d. The argument got so heated and the dissention so great that the commander had to rescue Paul again because he feared they would tear him apart
- 5. This was a clever move on Paul's part:
 - a. This wasn't a legal trial (that comes later); it was supposed to be a fact-finding meeting for the Roman commander to determine whether the Jews' accusations against Paul were legit
 - b. Paul knew it was a sham; there was no way he was going to get a fair hearing, and there was no way the commander was going to be presented with accurate information; in fact, Paul had just been punched in the face by order of the ill-tempered High Priest
 - c. So, He pitted his accusers against themselves and ultimately allowed them to destroy their own hearing

Supreme Court using the words from Biden's own attorney to show the administration didn't have the legal authority to order OSHA to issue the vaccine mandate; in a leaked recording, the attorney admitted they didn't have the authority and were going to use OSHA as a “work around”
--

6. Takeaway: You're probably familiar with Jesus' command to be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves; it's from Matthew 10:16 and reads this way: "**Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves**":
 - a. Snakes (e.g. serpents) in many ancient cultures were symbols of cleverness and wisdom because they know how to exist within the grass and among predators, and they know how to move about without drawing attention to themselves
 - b. So, because Jesus sent us out into the world as sheep among wolves, we need to be clever and wise like snakes knowing how to live, and exist, and move about in a world filled with those who wish to do us harm
 - c. I believe Paul was doing that here: he was being clever like a serpent
 - d. What I find interesting about this statement by Jesus is the context because it matches Paul's situation exactly; check out what Jesus said immediately following these words (READ Matthew 10:16-20)
 - e. In the face of persecution, like Paul we also need to be wise like serpents and innocent like doves

D. Paul was courageous (READ 23:11)

1. A few weeks ago we studied Acts 21 and I referred to Paul as having courageous faith
2. As Paul traveled to Jerusalem, he knew he would face tribulation and persecution:
 - a. The Holy Spirit warned him that in every city he would face such things
 - b. The Holy Spirit had revealed to the disciples in Tyre that Paul was going to face persecution in Jerusalem so they begged him not to go
 - c. When he was at Philippi, Agabus the prophet warned him that he would be bound by the Jews and handed over to the Romans, and even the begging and pleading of his closest companions couldn't deter him
 - d. You'll remember what he told the disciples at Caesarea: "**I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus**" (Acts 21:13)
3. You might also remember that we asked the question, Where does such courageous faith come from?
 - a. The answer was that it comes from the Lord Himself
 - b. It's not something we conger up ourselves
 - c. It's something He gives at the time when we need it most and that is exactly what we see here in our final verse
4. There are four things I want to highlight about the Lord's encouragement to Paul:
 - a. The first is that the Lord didn't wait to encourage Paul—it happened on the very next night
 - b. The second is that the Lord encouraged Paul with His physical presence—he stood by Paul's side
 - c. The third is that the Lord encouraged Paul by reminding him that he was fulfilling His (Christ's) cause
 - d. Forth and finally, the Lord encouraged Paul by revealing that his mission wasn't ending in Jerusalem—he would testify at Rome just as he had at Jerusalem
 - e. For all these reasons, Paul could "**take courage**" (as he did) to continue his mission in the face of the persecution and tribulation he would continue to face

5. Takeaway: Rarely in American history has it taken courage to be a Christian, but the time is coming, and may already be here, when that's exactly what it will take
 - a. Some of Paul's last words to the Corinthians were, "**Stay alert, stand firm in the faith, show courage, be strong.**"
 - b. We need to take these words to heart