

Paul was in Jerusalem at the time of the feast of Pentecost. He came with a collection taken from among the gentile churches to be given to those in need at the church in Jerusalem. The brothers welcomed Paul and his companions, but the elders warned him that there were many Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that bitterly opposed Paul because they heard that he taught Jews everywhere to turn away from the law, and the traditions of the Jewish people.

At the urging of the elders, Paul entered into purification rites with four men, and paid their way, in order to demonstrate his obedience to Jewish law. Towards the end of the week, some Jews from Asia spotted Paul, and stirred up the crowd against him. A riot broke out and the people would have killed Paul had not God delivered him through the hands of the Roman soldiers. Under their protection, Paul received permission to make a defense of his actions. He shared his testimony, and the people listened until he said that the Lord sent him to the Gentiles to share the good news.

This infuriated the Jews and a riot once again ensued. The Roman commander determined to beat Paul in order to make him tell them why the people were so upset with him that they would dare to disrupt the peace. Just as they were about to punish him, Paul avoided the flogging when he told the Roman commander that he was a Roman citizen.

Let us now continue in our study as we read Acts 22:30-23:11.

The Roman commander was in a quandary. He wanted to know the real reason why the Jews rioted. Since Paul was a Roman citizen, the commander's hands were tied, so he turned Paul over to the Jewish authorities. He thought that surely they could get to the bottom of the problem. As a result, Paul had the opportunity to defend himself, and to share the gospel before the Sanhedrin.

What do you suppose was going on in Paul's mind? He was the focus of the riots. The Jews already beat him nearly to death. The Roman guard arrested him, tried to flog him, and now he stood before the Sanhedrin. On the one hand, he had to be terrified, but on the other hand, he had a golden opportunity to share the gospel with Israel's religious leaders.

To a much smaller degree, we face this kind of tension as we share our faith today. Talking about Jesus is politically incorrect. Sharing the gospel is forbidden in some work places. Many individuals become uncomfortable when we talk about our relationship with the Lord. The tendency of our flesh is to fear the assumed reaction of the people we try to reach. We fear conflict, rejection, and the possibility that we might lose whatever relationship we have with the people with whom we speak.

Our fear of sharing the gospel, however, may be overcome with the awareness that we have an opportunity to make an eternal difference in a person's life, by allowing God to use us to lead them to saving faith in Jesus Christ. When we have the love of Christ in us, and allow His love to flow through us, so that we love others, and want what is best for them, that love, and genuine concern for their eternal soul, helps us to overcome our fear.

I think it is helpful for us to remember that Luke did not record everything said in these brief verses, but focuses on the comments that were key to understanding the events of that day. Here he records that Paul looked intently at the men of the Sanhedrin council, probably after enduring their accusations, and proclaimed that he had lived his life with a clear conscience before God, right up to that day.

We are not perfect people. We live in an imperfect world where we struggle with our sin nature. Everybody makes mistakes as we face the challenges of life. The best we can do is to

discipline ourselves so that, no matter what happens, we have a clear conscious before God. That means we live according to the principles of God's word, and the best we can, according to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. When God convicts us, we repent, and move forward with a heart set to honor the Lord with our lives.

In effect, Paul says to the most religious people in Israel, with God as my witness, I am innocent in His sight for all of my actions. At this point, the most powerful religious person among the Jews, who was the leader of the whole Sanhedrin council, orders that Paul be struck on the mouth.

This is reminiscent of the time when a religious official struck Jesus as He stood on trial before the High Priest, Annas. Paul made his defense before a different High Priest, Ananias. Writings outside the bible portray Ananias as a ruthless and unscrupulous man. In AD 52 he was called to Rome to answer to charges of cruelty. He was a typical Sadducee, haughty, wealthy, with a better than thou attitude, and politically connected. The nationalistic Jews hated him because of his political connections and alliances with Rome. He has been called one of the most unworthy men to ever hold the office of High Priest.

Ananias was not interested in Paul's defense. He didn't want to hear it. When they struck him in the mouth, Paul retorted, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall." The analogy of a whitewashed wall is that Ananias appeared to be very godly on the outside, but that covered up what he really was on the inside. If we are to have victory in this life, and any kind of meaningful service to the Lord, we should guard our hearts against hypocrisy. We should not have to try to appear to be something or someone we are not. If we are honest before God, and like Paul, are able to say my conscious is clear before God, then we can just be ourselves. If the love of Christ fills our souls, it will be more natural for us to love one another.

The hypocrisy of Ananias was that he broke the law as he dishonestly condemned Paul for breaking the law. Jewish law was much like our laws today. A man was to be considered innocent until proven guilty. The High priest was quick to administer discipline without hearing the case. Paul's conscious was clear. Ananias had no conscious at all.

Some present quickly condemned Paul for speaking against the High Priest. Paul says he did not realize that Ananias was the High Priest, and quotes the Law to stress his understanding. It seems to me to be unlikely that Paul did not know that Ananias was the High Priest. Probably Paul here recognizes and honors the position of High Priest, but ironically makes a subtle implication as to the unworthiness of Ananias to sit in that position.

It is much like the culture in America today. If some unworthy person sits in the White House, while we might not respect the person, we certainly respect the office, and the terrible responsibility that comes with it. That person might not be worthy of our trust, but he or she will be in need of our prayers. Like it or not, the President of the United States represents the people, and we want the president to succeed in preserving our values, and leading us into the future.

Paul was pretty quick on his feet. When the guards were about to flog him, he proclaimed his Roman citizenship. Here, where his situation looked hopeless, he used his experience as a Pharisee to divide the Sanhedrin. He got them arguing among themselves, so that the council would not find him guilty of breaking the Law.

As most of you know, the Sanhedrin council was made up of Sadducees and Pharisees, similar to Republicans and Democrats in our system of government. During the Maccabean Revolt, around 200 BC, when the Greeks defiled the temple, worship centered around Synagogues, where Rabbis taught the Law, and the Prophets, which are the Old Testament scriptures as we have them in our bibles today. With the rebuilding of the Temple by King

Herod, the Sadducees became the rulers of the temple. The instructions for the Levites, who were the priests, along with the details of their duties, are all found in the first five books of the Bible, which are also called the Law. Sadducees focused just on the Law, and discounted the other books of the Old Testament, while Pharisees received all of the books as scripture. This is why there was a difference in beliefs between the two. For the Sadducee, the concepts of the resurrection, angels and spirits were not in the Law, but the Pharisees accepted these theological positions based upon the greater body of scripture.

By calling upon the idea of the hope of the resurrection, Paul immediately gained the support of half the Sanhedrin. It wasn't because they agreed with Paul's gospel message, or approved of his ministry to the Gentiles, but because these two parties argued about their differences all of the time. It was a brilliant maneuver, because some of the leaders of the Pharisees arose and argued in Paul's defense. In order to infuriate the Sadducees, they posed the possibility that perhaps a spirit or an angel spoke to Paul.

I have seen news footage, from other countries, where members of two opposing legislative parties got in such heated arguments that fist fights broke out in their chambers. This is the scene in the Sanhedrin on that day. Pharisees fought with Sadducees. Pharisees pulled Paul to their side because he was one of them on this theological issue, while the Sadducees pulled on Paul because in their eyes he needed to be punished. The bible says that the dissension become so violent that the tribune feared that they might tear Paul to pieces. He ordered the soldiers to intervene and take Paul into protective custody at the barracks.

Religion today is divisive. Everyone has convictions that they are right, while others are wrong, so that every "ism" and "schism" imaginable prevents us from living together as the body of Christ. Theology is important, but not as important as having a personal and living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. In Him we form one body with many parts, each part working together with the others to accomplish His will.

In the relative safety of his confinement, the Lord appeared to Paul for the fourth time, according to Luke's account. Jesus appeared to Paul at his conversion on the Damascus Road. Paul had another vision when the Lord called him to come over to Macedonia on the second missionary journey. The Lord appeared a third time to comfort Paul when he was in trouble in Corinth. This time Jesus stood by Him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about Me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."

Earlier on, Paul indicated his plans to go and minister the gospel in Rome. His hopes of going to Rome must have seemed unreachable with the turn of events in Jerusalem. He will be incarcerated for a couple of years, and face many challenges. Who knows, he might have given up all together, had not God given him the encouragement he needed, and just when he needed it.

In life, and ministry, it is easy to become discouraged when events take a different direction than what we hoped or planned. With all the unrest in the world, none of us know for certain what tomorrow might bring, but we take comfort in our trust in the Lord, and the certain knowledge that He has a sovereign plan that will come to pass. If we are a part of His plan, and focus on His will for our lives, we know that He is with us, and will see us through.

Sunday is Christmas Day. We will join here as a Church family to celebrate what God has done to enable us to enjoy a personal and eternal relationship with Him. I'm looking forward to that worship service, and for the time I will spend with friends and family, throughout the holidays. I pray that this will be a special time for all of us.

No one can really understand how special Christmas is, until they come to the saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. God took on flesh, entered His creation, and lived with us,

as one of us. He lived a sinless life, proved that He is God in the flesh, and sacrificed His physical life for our sins. After three days, He arose from the grave and proved that He was really alive. He ascended into heaven, and He is coming again, maybe soon.

Christmas is about the love of Christ, His joy, and His peace. It is a time to celebrate our relationship with the Lord, and an opportunity to share His love with others. If there are any here who have not come to know Jesus as Lord, I would love the opportunity to show you how you can receive the greatest Christmas gift of all: eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. May God bless all of you with a merry Christmas, and a most blessed New Year.