

GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

Paul in Route to Rome, Part 5

Paul Stands before the Sanhedrin

Acts 22:30-23:11

May 11, 2008

I. Paul Confronts the High Priest

II. Paul Confronts the Sadducees

III. Christ Comforts Paul

- Over the past several months, as we have studied the Book of Leviticus on Wednesday evenings, one truth concerning the nature of God has become quite clear: He is a God of separation.
- Going all the way back to the Creation account in Genesis 1, the Scriptures state, “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And *God separated the light from the darkness.*” Genesis 1:3-4
- This concept of separation comes to the fore in the Book of Leviticus, where God is ultimately revealed as fundamentally separate, that is holy, from His Creation.
- Consequently, one of the ways in which God supremely reveals His glory is through the act of separation – demonstrating the distinction between the holy and profane.
- Therefore, as we observe acts of “separation” in the Scriptures, such as when Paul stands before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23, they serve as examples of God’s work in separating, ultimately truth from falsehood.

I. Paul Confronts the High Priest

- In **Verse 30**, Luke writes, “But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them.”

- After finding out that Paul was a Roman citizen, Lysias, the Roman Commander, ordered that he not be flogged.
 - However, the next day, Lysias “released” Paul to stand before the Sanhedrin in order that he [Lysias] find out why Paul had been so accused by the Jews. What was it that Paul did or said that caused such a disturbance among the Jews?
 - In other words, Lysias ordered the highest Jewish court to convene in order to gain clarification into the situation with Paul.
 - So, Lysias calls the Sanhedrin into an informal, ad hoc, meeting, bringin Paul down from the Antonia Fortress to the Sanhedrin council chamber on the western slope of Mount Moriah, the temple hill.
 - At this point, Paul is not in chains, likely out of respect for his Roman citizenship.
- Then, Luke continues, in **Verse 23:1**, “Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, ‘Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.’”
- This scene in Acts 23 marks the fifth [and last] time in the New Testament that the Sanhedrin has convened in order to investigate the claims of Christ.
 - The first time involved the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Mark 14:53-56).
 - The second time included Peter and John (Acts 4:5-22).
 - The third time involved the arrest of all of the Apostles (5:21).
 - The fourth time was the trial of Stephen (Acts 6:12).
 - Finally, the fifth time, here, begins with Paul “looking intently at the Council.”
 - As Paul prepares to address the Council, he looks “intently at the Council.”
 - The underlying Greek word means “to gaze upon” or “to fix one’s eyes on” or “to stare.”
 - No doubt the convened Sanhedrin was an intimidating group of men; however, Paul, far from being intimidated, stood firmly “looking intently” at them.
 - Notice, as well, that Paul speaks first. Although, he is technically the one “on trial”, Luke presents the scene in such a way that it is Paul who places the Sanhedrin on trial.
 - Paul opens his testimony before the Sanhedrin by addressing them as “Brethren.”
 - This is the first time that anyone addresses the Sanhedrin as such.

- Typically, it was “Rulers and elders of the people” (Acts 4:8) or “Brethren and fathers” (Acts 7:2).
- However, Paul had a special “connection” with the Sanhedrin. In fact, he most likely knew many of them and was probably a member at one point himself (Acts 26:10).
- Yet, it was Paul’s next words that greatly angered the Sanhedrin. For, he said, “...I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.”
 - Recall, Paul had been accused by the Jews of (1) teaching against the Jewish people, the Mosaic Law; and the Temple; and (2) Defiling the sanctuary of the Temple by bringing in Gentiles.
 - So, Paul’s comment that “...I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God...” is a declaration of innocence.
 - One scholar writes “conscience” is “a thoroughly Pauline word” (Romans 2:15; 9:1; 13:5; 1 Corinthians 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25-29; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 4:2; 5:11).
 - Paul’s point is clear: **He is not perfect, yet, he stands justified before God. The Sanhedrin Council may declare him “condemned”; yet, God has declared him “righteous”...not because of anything that he has done, but because of everything that Christ has done for him!**
 - This is the irony of this scene: the Jewish high court seeks to condemn Paul; yet, before God, he stands more than innocent...he is righteous. Whereas, it is the Sanhedrin that stands condemned before God.
 - Paul’s conscience is clear because he trusts, not in his own works, but the works of Christ.
 - As Paul will later write to the Roman Christians:

“For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” Romans 1:17

- Then, in **Verse 2**, “The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth.”
 - The high priest here was Ananias, the son of Nedebeaus. He had been appointed by Herod of Chalcis (the younger brother of Herod Agrippa I) in A.D. 47. He remained in the high priestly office for eleven or twelve years.

- He had a reputation for cruelty, brutal violence and corruption. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Ananias was an evil man who had his servants steal the tithes that were to go to the common priests. Furthermore, he would beat any priest who resisted this order.
- In fact, five years prior to this scene, Ananias was even called to Rome to defend himself against charges that he had participated in an ambush against several Samaritan pilgrims.
- Due to his pro-Roman positions, he was killed by Jewish nationalists in A.D. 66, about the time that the war against Rome began.
- Consequently, the scene, here, where Ananias orders Paul to be hit, is perfectly consistent with the historical record of the high priest at the time.
- Then, in **Verse 3**, Paul responds directly to Ananias, “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?”
 - Here, the tables turn. The judge becomes the judged, and vice versa.
 - Paul asks the high priest, “Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?”
 - Paul is angered by the high priest’s violation of the very Law that he claims to uphold.
 - F.F. Bruce writes, “The rights of defendants were carefully safeguarded by Jewish law, and they were presumed innocent until proved guilty. Paul had not yet been properly charged, let alone tried and convicted. The high priest, who was there to administer the law, had broken the law by ordering Paul to be struck.”

“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.” Leviticus 19:15

- Paul also powerfully speaks in his indignation, telling Ananias, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!”
 - This allusion, here, may quite possibly be a curse: “The LORD will strike you with wasting disease and with fever, inflammation and fiery heat, and with drought and with blight and with mildew. They shall pursue you until you perish.” (Deuteronomy 28:22)
 - This is the only reference to a “whitewash wall” in the New Testament. However, Jesus uses a similar phrase when referring to the Pharisees as “whitewash tombs” in Matthew 23:27.

- Yet, each of these are derived from an Old Testament reference in Ezekiel 13:10-16. Here, the false prophets of Israel are referred to as “whitewashed walls.”
 - The point is clear: on the outside, they look “clean, pure.” They say the right things. They attend synagogue. In fact, they are there every time the doors open. They listen to the right music; wear the right kind of clothes. In today’s language, they would have had an *ichthus* on every car; had every station on their radio dial set to KSBJ; they would have never seen a rated R movie; they would have gone to church even on vacations...and they would have made sure everyone knew it! However, on the “inside” they are dead...like tombs.
 - Furthermore, the reason why tombs were often “whitewashed” was to make them more visible. So is the motive of Ananias. He seeks to be visible in his self-righteousness. Yet, Paul is righteous because of someone else – Jesus Christ!
 - This was the ultimate statement of hypocrisy.
- Immediately, in **Verses 4-5**, Luke writes, “But the bystanders said, ‘Do you revile God’s high priest?’” To which Paul responds, “I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, ‘YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.’”
- Interestingly, the bystanders did not have a problem with Ananias breaking the Law by ordering that Paul be struck; yet, they had a problem with Paul’s response to the high priest.
 - However, Paul’s response to the bystanders has led to disagreement among commentators and scholars as to what he meant.
 - There are several possible interpretations of Paul’s words:
 - First of all, some have proposed that Paul did not hear the order by Ananias to have him struck; therefore, he was speaking, in Verse 3, to the individual who struck him, not the high priest.
 - Secondly, some have suggested that since Paul’s eyesight was poor, that he did not see that it was the high priest who gave the order.
 - Thirdly, some have asserted that since Paul had not been in Jerusalem for a long while, that he would not have recognized the high priest.
 - Fourthly, some have said that Paul reacted [somewhat wrongly] in anger without considering the high position that Ananias held.

- Finally, and I believe the proper interpretation, Paul was speaking rather ironically, as if to say, “Oh, I’m sorry, I did not think a man who spoke like that could possibly be the high priest?” In other words, Paul is saying that the man may have the “title” but he does not meet the “qualifications.”
- However, some have suggested that the fifth option, here, is not possible.
- John MacArthur writes, “Although an evil man and a disgrace to his office, the high priest still occupied a God-ordained position of authority. He was not to be reviled but respected (Deuteronomy 17:8-12).”
- H. Hanse, in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* concurs, “The high-priest stands before God. To abuse him, especially in the discharge of his office, is blasphemy.”
- In support of these statements, commentators note that Paul even quotes from Exodus 22:28 as he “apologizes” for his impropriety.
- **However, what these commentators seems to fail to consider is the fact that Jesus Christ, through His Incarnation, life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and intercession, perfectly fulfilled the office of the high priest [and Exodus 22:28].**

As John Calvin rightly asserts, “...Paul knew what place he [Ananias] had, when he said that he [Ananias] abused his power...if Paul did reverence the priesthood, he should have given some honor to the man which had the same. And now it is not to be thought that Paul honored those...(as if their perfect and lawful authority did continue) who, under the title of the high priests, did reign as lords without any law or right...forasmuch as **the majesty of the priesthood was abolished by the coming of Christ**, and that there followed such filthy profanation.

Calvin continues, “Brethren, **I acknowledge nothing in this man which belongs to the priest...**”

- Had Paul said what he did to Ananias 100 years earlier, a valid charge could have been made that he [Paul] was, indeed, blasphemous. However, Jesus Christ is now the high priest! And to sit and assert his authority as high priest, it is Ananias who is the one who stands in condemnation.

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II. Paul Confronts the Sadducees

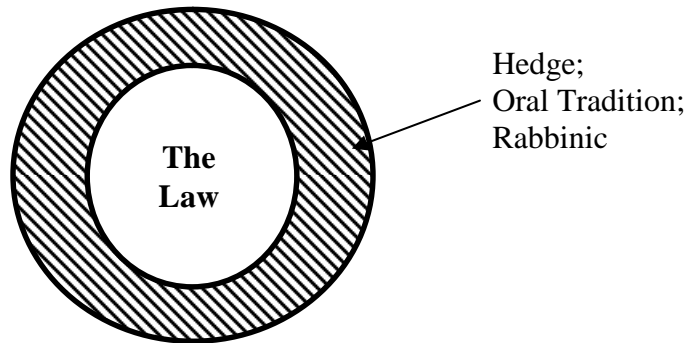
- In **Verses 6-9**, Luke writes, “But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, ‘Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!’ As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. And there occurred a great uproar; and some of the

scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, ‘We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?’”

- Paul rightly observes, as he sits before the Council, two distinct parties: the Sadducees and Pharisees.

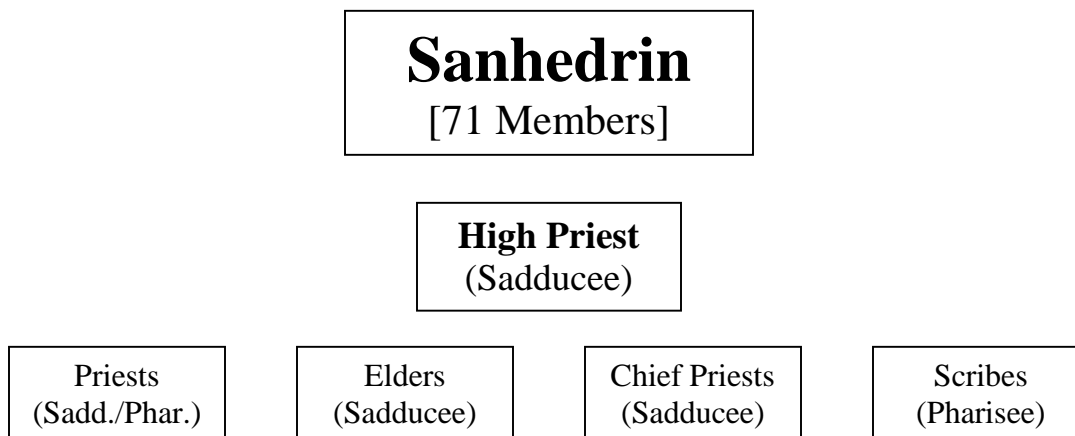
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- **Pharisees** (“separated ones”)
 - The “popular” party
 - Emphasized obedience to the Law
 - Legalistic in the development and adherence to Rabbinical (extra-biblical) law



- Example of the Law vs. the Rabbinical Tradition
 - Law: Remember the Sabbath and Keep it Holy.
 - Rabbinical Tradition: Is it lawful to eat an egg layed on the Sabbath?
 - Obeyed the Law as far as appearances were concerned; however, their hearts were far from God
 - See Isaiah 1
 - Believed in the **immortality of the soul, final resurrection** with rewards and punishments, and **angels**.
 - Related to modern-day Hasidic Jews
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- **Sadducees**
 - High ranking priestly class
 - Aristocratic sect
 - The High Priest was a Sadducee
 - Viewed only the Torah (Genesis through Revelation) as authoritative
 - Read the rest of the Old Testament but did not use it for legal norms
 - Rejected the Rabbinical Law as absurd
 - What the Torah did not address, they felt free to accommodate
 - Did not believe in a resurrection of the dead, immortality of the soul, future rewards and punishments, or angels.
 - Enjoyed privileged positions in society and managed to get along well under Roman rule

- Any movement that might upset order and authority was bound to appear dangerous in their eyes
 - Deistic characteristics
 - Believed that God was not actively involved in the universe; man controls his own destiny
 - Likely were influenced by Greek philosophy
 - Enemies with the Pharisees
 - Focused their attention on the Temple and ceremony
 - No longer existed after the Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70
- **The Sanhedrin**
- The highest ruling body and judicial court in Israel at the time of Christ
 - Organized similar to the body of elders under Moses in the Old Testament
 - Granted limited authority over certain religious, civil and criminal matters by the foreign nations that dominated Israel throughout its history.



- Here, in **Verse 6**, Paul declares one of the central truths of the Christian faith: “the hope and resurrection of the dead!”
- As N.T. Wright declares:

The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won...If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense – [then] it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my life. But if Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world... Easter means that a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things – and that we would will and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory over them all.

- Not only did Paul believe in a resurrection, but, unlike the Pharisees, he knew that the resurrection is not some far-off distant hope; but it is a present reality. For, Paul had seen the **resurrected Christ!**

- Paul knew that resurrection was one of the central truths that divided the Pharisees and Sadducees [two groups who normally despised each other, but one come together to attack common enemies].
- Furthermore, Paul also knew a central truth of Christianity: **truth divides!**
- Not only this, on the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees were in the majority.
- Therefore, “there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.”
- Ultimately, Paul’s words resonated with the Pharisees; but were hated by the Sadducees.
- Luke gives the reason for this in **Verse 8**, “For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.”
- Consequently, as F.F. Bruce notes, “a Sadducee could not become a Christian without abandoning the distinctive theological position of his party; a Pharisee could become a Christian and remain a Pharisee – in the early decades of Christianity, at least.”
- The Scriptures even indicate that many Pharisees come to faith in Christ: Nicodemus (John 3:1) and others (Acts 15:5). However, no Sadducee conversions are recorded.
- Ultimately, the argument was so heated that the Pharisees even began to defend Paul, saying, in **Verse 9**, “We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?”

III. Christ Comforts Paul

- As the truth of the resurrection tore the Sanhedrin apart, the Roman commander, Lysias, feared that Paul “would be torn to pieces by them.” **Verse 10**
- As a result, he “ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.”
 - Yet again, Paul is saved by the pagan Romans from death by the self-righteous Jews.
 - They, once again, bring Paul back into the military barracks in the Fortress of Antonia.
- Finally, in **Verse 11**, “...on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, ‘Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.’”

- It's amazing how a word of "comfort" was given in the New Testament.
 - Christ does *not* say, "Paul, take courage, you will soon be released from prison and will be blessed with riches and prosperity!"
 - Rather, the comfort of Christ affirms Paul's calling; his passion; his purpose.
 - **In other words, the comfort from Christ does not involve the removal of conflict in Paul's life; rather, it involves purpose and peace in the midst of that conflict. This is something the world can never provide!**
 - **This will involve further suffering and persecution; yet, it serves to greatly comfort, not discourage, the Apostle!**
 - In fact, the Lord promises Paul that he will have the privilege of doing exactly what he desires most: **proclaim the gospel in Rome!**
 - This promise will serve as a great comfort to Paul as he spends the next two years mostly in prison, awaiting its fulfillment.

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- Once again, this scene demonstrates that Paul knows that truth will divide; yet, he still boldly proclaims Christ even in the most hostile of environments.
- Yet, even as he confronts the hypocrisy and corruption of the Sanhedrin, he is able to connect with them at a certain level in order to demonstrate that only Christ is the fulfillment of their hope.
- Darrell Bock writes, "When Paul mentions the hope of resurrection, he is speaking to Jews about a doctrine the Jews have discussed. Paul's ability to think from a variety of perspectives, even perspectives he does not share, is part of what makes him so effective. This connection with his Jewish hearers is rooted in the fact that Christianity sees itself as the natural and promised extension of Jewish hope, but his principle of connecting with an audience is also seen in Acts 17, when Paul addresses non-Jewish hearers and seeks to connect with them through the idea of God as Creator of all, even citing ideas from the Greeks' own poetry to make his point."
- So it should be with us today. We must always make such a "connection" for only Christ is the answer to all of life's most profound questions.
- Only in Christ do we find the answers to the basic questions that all of mankind has asked throughout the generations. Questions concerning our origin and purpose are perfectly fulfilled in Christ and in Christ alone!
- As Paul preached to a pagan Gentile audience in **Acts 17:24-28a**, may we, too, proclaim the universal need for Jesus Christ, the Lord of all Creation!