

Sermon 70, The Kingdom of the Risen High Priest, Acts 23:1-11

Proposition: Jesus is the real high priest of God, and ruler of God's people, because He has been raised from the dead. When you understand that Jesus' right to rule and serve as high priest flows from His resurrection, you will understand why Paul rejects the high priesthood of Ananias and prophetically places the entire system Ananias heads under God's curse. The approach of the real Kingdom of the Risen High Priest will necessarily crush and destroy any kingdom and priesthood not based on resurrection.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the passage before us has been the subject of some confusion. Is Luke simply taking a moment to report on Paul's human weakness? To remind us that Paul is committed to obeying the law, but at times even the great apostle's temper got the better of him? Is this a Romans 7 moment? I don't think so. And the reason I don't think so is because Luke is clearly returning to a key location and picking up a key theme that we spent a long time discussing back in the first five chapters of this work. That theme, of course, is the Temple and its leadership. Is the Jerusalem Temple *the* locus where God is to be found on Earth? And, by extension, is the bureaucracy that runs it some sort of priesthood through which

access to God is controlled? As we have seen, Luke is very Temple-conscious. His gospel opens in the Temple, and closes in the Temple too. The first part of Acts deals with breaching temple boundaries and repudiating Temple leadership. Here, too, on Paul's return to Jerusalem many years later, the same question comes up. Did you notice back in ch. 21 that when the mob grabbed Paul, "they dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut" on his retreating form (Act 21:30 NAS)? That was intentional, on the part of official Judaism and on the part of Luke to record it. The Temple is hereafter closed to followers of Jesus, according to the determination of those who run it.

But Luke is introducing another theme here, a final theme that definitively shows that the Temple's days are done. That theme is the resurrection of the dead.

I want you to notice, then, that Paul brings up three issues in his trial before the Sanhedrin. The first issue is the identity of the high priest. The second is the identity of the "ruler of your [God's] people." The third is the resurrection of the dead. When we understand that all of these issues are related, that Luke's point is that being raised from the dead makes Jesus the true high priest and the true ruler over God's people, this whole scene suddenly makes sense. This is not a Romans 7 moment. This is a Colossians 1 or Philippians 3 moment, a preeminence-of-Christ moment. Praise God! Now let's look at it together.

I. Preliminary Reminders

Before we dig into our Acts text, I just want to make sure that you have two other Scripture passages fresh in your mind.

A. Jesus Rules His Kingdom as Firstborn from the Dead, Rev. 1:5

The first is the apostolic greeting of Revelation ch. 1, one which I use three times per month or so at the beginning of worship here at Harvest. This greeting identifies Jesus Christ as "the faithful witness" (something that Paul was doing in front of the Sanhedrin!), "the firstborn from the dead," and "the ruler over the kings of the earth." Notice how it juxtaposes those last two. I submit to you that John is saying that Jesus is the ruler over the kings of the earth because of His resurrection from the dead. Do you follow me here? Jesus is King because He is risen. The one who conquered death is the one, and the only one, worthy to lead the human race. So long as death reigns, we are all subject to him as the king of terrors. But when a stronger one than Death comes and kills him, then that one becomes our King to rule and save us.

B. Jesus Serves as High Priest by the Power of an Indestructible Life, Heb. 7:16

Listen now the Hebrew writer:

For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests. And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become such not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life. (Heb 7:14-16 NAS)

Again, did you catch that? Jesus is the great high priest of His people because of the resurrection. He is not a Levitical priest. He is not even a Judean priest. He is a Melchizedekian priest, because He has risen from the dead. His life is indestructible.

So as we go into this passage of Acts, keep in mind that the kingship and priesthood of Christ are predicated on His resurrection from the dead — the very thing Paul identified as the real issue in his dispute with the Jews! In other words, had they been prepared to acknowledge Jesus as the risen one, they would also have been prepared to acknowledge Him as King and Priest, and Paul as His legitimate, authorized witness.

II. Paul Before the Sanhedrin, vv. 1-10

All right. So with that background, let's see what happened with Paul and the Sanhedrin.

A. First Issue: The Kingdom of God, vv. 1-2

The first issue that comes up in the council meeting is Paul's opening conversational gambit, in which he claims to be a faithful citizen of God's Kingdom.

1. Paul Claims Kingdom Citizenship, v. 1

We looked at the evidence for this reading of the text last week. Suffice it to say that Paul uses a word whose root is the Greek word for city, *polis*, and says that he has lived with a clean conscience as a citizen. That is not as a citizen of Tarsus, or of Rome, or even of Jerusalem, but of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly Kingdom of God. Essentially, to use the language of modern evangelicalism, he is saying "I have been saved for decades, and I have lived just like a Christian that whole time."

2. Paul's Claim Violently Rejected, v. 2

The High Priest shows what he thinks of Paul's claim by commanding that the apostle be struck on the mouth. Knowing that they were just trying to beat him to death the previous day, this was not a playful slap. This was an honest-to-goodness tooth-dislodger. Luke doesn't record whether the apostle spat blood and a couple of teeth out, but we can be sure that he was left with a few dental bills by this slap.

So again, why did Paul begin by bringing up the Kingdom? Because he preached the kingdom. He lived for the kingdom. The reign of Christ is what his mission work was all about. And so, he doesn't say "I've kept the commandments." He knew the commandments, and he kept them. But he doesn't want to discuss the law here. He doesn't want to pull out his dick and show that he is just as circumcised as all the rest of them. He wants to take the discussion in the direction of the kingdom of God. And since the ostensible topic is his guilt, he brings up his own citizenship in the Kingdom to get things started off right.

B. Second Issue: The High Priest of God, vv. 3-5

Now, as I said, what happens next is not a Romans 7 moment where Paul indulges in the evil that he hates. Instead, it is the logical next step. Within the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, who are the authorized religious leaders? Do the ostensible high priest and his crowd of followers actually count as real representatives of Jehovah God? The answer, brothers and sisters, is no. The authorized religious leaders are not the Sanhedrin, but Paul and his missionary team, plus the other apostles.

1. Paul Prophecies Against the Levitical System, v. 3

It is the unconcealed contempt for God's law that brings this issue into the open, though. Paul has indicated that the Kingdom of God is no longer confined to geopolitical Israel under the physical son of David. Now, in response to the high priest's violent abuse of a prisoner, he opens his mouth and makes a prophecy.

The law in question is found in Deuteronomy 25:1-2, which reads

If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked, then it shall be if the wicked man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall then make him lie down and be beaten in his presence with the number of stripes according to his guilt.

Did you notice that? The guilty man is to be beaten after he has been convicted of a crime through due process of law. He is not to be beaten while testifying. Paul calls this out immediately, for it is not just a sin in itself, but a sign that something is deeply rotten in the state of Israel. In fact, things are so rotten that the high priest is due to be smitten by God because he is a hypocrite, a whitewashed wall. The reference is to Ezekiel 13, where false prophets are dubbed "whitewashed walls" and doomed to fall in flood and hail.

Thus I shall spend My wrath on the wall and on those who have plastered it over with whitewash; and I shall say to you, 'The wall is gone and its plasterers 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 God. (Eze 13:15-16 NAS)

Ananias, in other words, is in the same boat as the prophets God judged in Ezekiel's day. He is a false religious leader, a whitewashed tomb full of uncleanness and spiritual deadness.

So Paul, looking into the future, announces that God will strike this corrupt priest who leads a corrupt and doomed religious establishment. Woe to him!

And indeed, Josephus tells us that Ananias met his end at the hands of Jewish partisans who dragged him out of the culvert where he was hiding and slaughtered him. It was not pretty. But then the curse of God seldom is.

2. Paul Rejects the High Priesthood of Ananias, vv. 4-5

Now, according to the Romans 7-moment interpretation, Paul now apologizes for his prophetic denunciation of Ananias. That is absurd. Unfortunately, our Bibles uniformly mistranslate this verse. The verb of being is not in the past tense, but the present. In other words, rather than saying "I didn't know he was the high priest," Paul says "I don't know that he *is* the high priest!"

What is Paul saying? If you take out the double negative, Paul is explicitly saying "This dude is not the high priest, or if he is, then I'm Donald Duck." Paul doesn't know that Ananias is the high priest. In other words, Paul knows that Ananias isn't the high priest.

So why does Paul then quote from Exodus 22, with its statement that you shall not curse a ruler of your people? Because he is saying “I didn’t curse a ruler of my people.” Just as some Americans today might say “I didn’t curse a ruler of my people when I said ‘Let’s go Brandon’ because Biden actually lost the election,” so Paul says “Ananias is not the real high priest and thus not a ruler of my people in any legitimate sense. Therefore, when I announce that God will smite him I am not violating Scripture. I am affirming Scripture, because Ananias is the one who cursed the real ruler of our people.”

In one sense, either way you read this passage you can see that Paul is devoted to keeping the law. But when you read him as deliberately stating that the high priest is high priest in name only, and bringing up again the issue of the kingdom by implying that the real ruler of God’s people is Jesus Christ, then the passage coheres better with its context. After all, what is the conclusion of this event? An “attaboy” from Jesus. Not a reprimand, or a reminder to honor the high priest, but a statement that his witness was good and should be repeated in the same way in Rome.

If Jesus endorses it, I don’t think it’s something that Paul was apologizing for. Rather, Paul was challenging the high priest by saying “You are nothing of the kind.”

C. Real Issue, vv. 6-9

And that, in turn, leads straight to the real issue. One can well imagine that the apostle’s flat-out denial that Ananias was any kind of high priest left the room momentarily stunned into silence. They thought they understood the renegade Jew in their midst. But his language was so shocking that for a moment, they were speechless. He had not just spoken against the people, the law, and the place. He had actually verbally cursed the high priest and when called on it had doubled down. They had expected him to have slightly more decency than that.

So in the stunned silence, Paul seizes the initiative in the conversation once again, this time to announce the real issue.

1. Hint: It’s not the People, Law, or Temple

Again, hint: It’s not any of the things he had been charged with by the crowd.

2. It’s the Resurrection of the Dead

Rather, Paul says “I’m just going to announce the real issue here.” The real issue is the resurrection. He is on trial because Jesus is alive, and as the Risen Christ He has commanded Paul to be His witness all over the world, including here in Jerusalem.

Now, again, the issue is the resurrection because that is the root beneath contests over who is priest and who is ruler.

3. Jesus is Priest and Ruler Because He Is Risen!

Let me say it again: Jesus is the champion of the human race who has beaten our greatest foe: Death. Because He is risen, He is the great high priest. Because He is risen, he is the ruler over the kings of the earth and over His people too.

4. Paul Stands with the Pharisees on resurrection, vv. 7-9

Paul, though, doesn’t just point out that the resurrection is the real issue. He also exploits a longstanding theological disagreement within the Sanhedrin to get them to turn on each other

instead of presenting a united front against him. Now, I'm not sure what they would have been able to talk Claudius Lysias into if they had all agreed that Paul was enemy no. 1. Perhaps they would have been able to get permission to kill him for his role in the riots that had just broken out around him. Perhaps they would have been able to get him banished to Britain or some other far-flung province of the empire. I'm really not sure, and it's not something Luke goes into because it didn't happen. But the reason it didn't happen was Paul's shrewdness. He knew that if he could turn the Sanhedrin on each other, it would graphically illustrate to the Roman commander on the scene that all this was nothing more than a debate within Judaism and thus not actually anything worth troubling about. The Romans did not have a mandate to intervene in Jewish disputes. They were just there to keep the peace, which meant preventing angry theological partisans from beating their opponents to death in the streets.

So Paul shrewdly turns the Sanhedrin on each other by identifying as a Pharisee. And he even gets some cautious Pharisaic support! They don't give him a full-throated defense, but they can't rule out the possibility that his gospel was given him by an angel from heaven. And so they immediately start trying to score points against the Sadducees, who in turn fight back for all they are worth. From a Roman perspective, the point is clear: These dumb Jews can't get along about anything. They weren't rioting because Paul was an actual threat like that Egyptian terrorist a few years prior had been. They were rioting because they liked theological arguments.

V. Paul Rescued by Rome, v. 10

So the Romans marched in and rescued Paul again, leaving the council to whatever fight they wanted to have. Again, Luke is highlighting that earthly citizenship can be a wonderful blessing and provide a solid platform from which to witness to Jesus. By the way, he's also showing that shrewdness should be a quality of Christians. Of course Paul's move was cunning — and there is nothing wrong with that. Jesus Himself told us to think like snakes.

VI. Paul Encouraged by Jesus, v. 11

Finally, though, the scene fast forwards to that night.

A. Kingdom Presence: The Risen Lord Comes to Paul

Jesus comes and stands by Paul. The Son of God was with him in the fire, just as He was with Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. And He is with you when you are in trouble too.

B. Kingdom Testimony to Jesus in Jerusalem

Jesus approves of what Paul has done. He tells Paul to take courage because his testimony in Jerusalem was exactly what Jesus was looking for.

Can you imagine Jesus coming and giving you a verbal assurance that you had done something difficult just right? Maybe you're at a tough time in your life. Don't lose heart or give up hope. Rather, know that Jesus hasn't changed. The one who encouraged Paul for his faithfulness will encourage you for yours. Don't give up hope.

C. Kingdom Promise: You Will Reach Rome

And then Jesus gives a final promise: Paul, you will reach Rome. And you will witness there just like you did here.

So how can we know the Kingdom's certainty? For one thing, its servants are willing to take on the powers that be. For another, Jesus affirms them when they do so. And finally, the witness is spreading. The good news is not locked up in Jerusalem. It covers the whole earth — Rome, and the uttermost parts.

So don't give up. Know that the Lord who conquered death can conquer the Levitical system, the Roman Empire, and anything else that stands against Him. He is the firstborn from the dead, the ruler over the kings of the earth, and the greatest High Priest. And He is yours. Amen.