

Acts 23:1-35

“Encouraged By Christ”

If you're joining us for the 1st time here at Calvary Chapel, we're enjoying our journey through the book of Acts and we're just coming upon that particular portion whereby Paul is preparing to be imprisoned for what will be the remainder of the book. He's become Paul the prisoner, and there are those who debate as to whether or not he did right in going to Jerusalem and I've touched on that in weeks past, but I personally believe that he did, not only for the 4 or 5 reasons that I gave you a couple weeks ago, but here's 4 more; Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon, or what has become known as the “Prison epistles.”

If Paul hadn't gone to Jerusalem and been arrested, we wouldn't have those particular epistles as essential as they are. and Even Paul himself was convinced that what was happening to him was a direct result of the will of God for his life, consequently as you read those epistles you read things like, “...*it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ;*” Phil 1:13 Not that “My chains were a result of my foolishness, and a real hindrance to the gospel.”

There were many of the palace guard who were thankful that Paul had been arrested, not because of the injustice, but because it provided for them an opportunity to hear the gospel and be saved of which otherwise they'd have never heard. So they were thankful that God's sovereignty brought Paul to them in this manner. So, far from hindering God's work in his life he told the Philippians, “...*the things which happened to me (in regards to his arrest and imprisonment) have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel,*”

In Philemon we read, “...*though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you -- being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ*” Philem 8-9 He didn't perceive himself as a victim of injustice via the Jews, or a prisoner of Rome, he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ He realized his chains were *in Christ*, what an incredible thing, to actually come to that place whereby we *really* believe that God is in control, that He owns the editing rights to my life, and that there isn't anything that's going to happen to me but that God hasn't (in His sovereignty) allowed it (in some way) for *my* eternal good, and *His* eternal glory. Or as we read in that classic passage in Rom 8:28 “*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*” Now that's either true, or it isn't, and you either believe it, or you don't, Paul believed it, therefore he was able to undergo, and endure whatever it was that came into his life because he knew that it had to pass through the sovereign hands of God 1st. Doesn't mean that certain things weren't a bummer, or that he never had personal emotional difficulty with regards to a certain circumstance, but that he was able to ultimately resolve to the fact that God is in control and He is well able to keep that which has been committed to His trust, which in this case is my life, and every detail that surrounds it or is somehow linked *to* it.

Well, last week we listened in as Paul sought to defend himself on the steps of the Antonia fortress right there near the temple courts overlooking the mob/multitude that had gathered around him. and That blew up in his face, he'd been doing pretty good, had the Jews right where he wanted them with respect to their interest and attention, was sharing the reality of the resurrected Christ. He'd mentioned his own conduct prior to Christ, his conversion *by* Christ, but as he rolled into his commission *from* Christ it was the mention of 1 word, "Gentiles," and that set the scene *off!* They were tearing their clothes, throwing dust in the air, shouting, "Away with such a man from the earth, he's not fit to live!" So the commander had him brought into the barracks where he was about to have him examined under scourging to find out what that was all about. Because he'd been speaking Aramaic, but the commander spoke Greek, so as they were getting ready to tear into him Paul mentioned the fact that he was a Roman citizen.

Long story short that changed the whole dynamic, he immediately took his binding off, and just had him placed under custody, but because he still wanted to know exactly what was going on he called for the Sanhedrin to convene the next day so that they might further examine him. and So that's where we find Paul today, he's been brought down and set before the council so as to state his case once again.

Vs1

Now if you're anything like me, already you're arrested by this single phrase, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." Now we know that Jesus is the standard, but Paul was an amazing individual, how many of us can say that we've always lived in all good conscience before God until this day? That we've never consciously gone against the grain of God's will for our lives, and that as soon as we did cross the line (because he's not insinuating sinless perfection) by the course of conviction, we immediately repented and sought to get right with God right there on the spot? Because that's what Paul is saying, he steps forward, locks eyes with the council and says, "Men and brethren as I stand before you here today I have *never* consciously violated my relationship with God." Now that's quite an amazing statement isn't it? He's saying that his conscious has always been in agreement with God's will for his life according to his understanding of the word and ways of God. He told Timothy, "*I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did, as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day,*" 2 Tim 1:3

You say, "Well, wait a minute Jeff, before Christ changed his life he was a persecutor of Christians, so how can he say that he's lived in all good conscience before God until this day?" That's a good question and brings up a point that's worth mentioning and I don't want you to miss it, and that is this; a man's conscience does not regulate, or *adjust* the standard of a man, it only applies it. "What do ya mean?" What I mean is that a clean conscience doesn't necessarily indicate that one is right with God, the conscience of a man will enforce the standard of a man, but it can't set that standard.

As I was growing up my mom used to throw out that old guilt trip when I was doing something I probably shouldn't be and she'd say, "Let your conscience be your guide!" and It would generally work because I had a pretty good set of morals pounded into me from my youth. But you tell a militant Islamic to let his conscience be *his* guide, and we're all gonna die, and far from his conscience condemning him, his conscience will commend him before God and he'll believe he's done a wonderful work in the name of Allah destroying infidels like you and me, he'll think he's done his god a favor. Same thing with a suicide bomber, or a Hindu woman who stands on the bank of the Ganges river with that little baby in her arms mumbling a little prayer and then casting her baby into those filthy waters thinking that will somehow appease her gods and grant her peace, and she'll do it in all good conscience. So the conscience doesn't set the standard, it only applies it, some people can do horrible, atrocious things thinking that they're doing God a favor, and such was the case with Paul. Before his close encounter with Jesus Christ he thought he was doing God a favor in destroying these blaspheming (according to his understanding) Christians.

That's why it's so critical as to what it is that's setting the standard for right and wrong, pleasing or not pleasing to God in your life. and If it's anything less than the word of God rightly divided it truth, seen through the lens of the person of Jesus Christ you're already in trouble. "Well, I figure I'm a pretty good person, never really hurt anybody, and God will understand that." Really, what sets the standard for your understanding of what God will "understand?" Because my bible declares, "*There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.*" Rom 3:10-12

So when you say you're "pretty good" and the bible says that there's only one good and that's God, than who's *your* standard, you're pretty good compared to who? There are plenty of people in this world you can perhaps compare yourself to and feel pretty good about yourself, but the problem is their not the standard, Jesus Christ is the standard and He's perfect, so when you measure yourself up to Him, you find yourself falling radically short.

Suddenly I have a need, if I'm to be accepted before God and yet I don't measure up I need help, now we're getting somewhere. That's where Jesus comes in, and He says, "If you'll just believe in Me, and accept the work that I did upon the cross in paying the sin debt *you* owed by the shedding of *My* blood, I'll take *your* sin and impute to you *My* righteousness." That's what the bible teaches, and once I accept that I have a whole new standard of consciousness, and Paul is saying that to the degree he understood God, both before Christ and after Jesus changed his life, he's lived with a clear conscious before God.

Now again that didn't save him, only Jesus Christ can save you, not a pure conscience, the conscience can be easily flawed. That's why I felt it important to challenge you as to your standard of conscious approval, because just because you aren't violating your conscience, that doesn't necessarily indicate you're right with God. Now I've violate my conscience before I met Christ and after as to what I thought was God's standard, and I would suspect you've done the same, but Paul says he didn't do that.

Vs2-5

Couple things to notice here, #1 Paul's on trial here with regards to the way he's been teaching God's word and God's ways to the Jew, they thought he was violating their God given heritage. and Now he says, "I always *have had* and to this day *still do have* a clear conscience before God with respect the things that I've both said and done in my life." and So Ananias motions to those beside him and they haul off and strike him across the mouth.

Now we don't have time to talk too much about Ananias, suffice it to say he was one of, if not *the* worst high priest in the history of Israel, he was just a very corrupt individual. So when Paul speaks of his good conscience, Ananias has him struck and Paul flares up and says, "God will smite you white washed wall! For you sit to judge me *according* to the law, and do you command me to be struck *contrary* to the law?" Deut 25 says that a man is only to be beaten if he's found guilty and at that they were to cause him to lie down and basically be smitten across the back, not KO'd in the face. So Paul is saying, "You're here to uphold the law, and judge according to the law, and yet you violate the law yourself in having this man strike me though I've been proven guilty of nothing, God will strike you, you white washed wall." Which that was more prophetic than perhaps Paul even knew in that in a couple years from this point Ananias was to be assassinated by his own countrymen who were just fed up with his corruption.

But Paul calls him a "white washed wall." What does that mean? It basically parallels what Jesus said to the Pharisees when He said, "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*" Matt 23:27-28 Paul is basically saying, "You hypocrite! You set there all high and pious, acting all spiritual like you're the essence of God's righteousness and it's nothing but a thin veneer covering your own spiritual deadness and uncleanness before God. He's saying you look good on the outside, but on the inside before God you're unclean, you're not right with God, you're leading a life of self-righteous hypocrisy and the time of God's dealing with you is coming soon!

That's another thing that's so critical to grab hold of, that man looks to the outward appearance, but God is searching your heart. It doesn't matter if you draw near to Him with your mouth, or honor Him with your lips if your heart is far from Him, God sees all that, He knows your heart.

Do yourself a favor, don't play church, get right with Jesus Christ give to Him your heart, let Him robe you in His righteousness rather than trying to stand before God in the filthy rags of your own righteousness, because God rejects anything other than being washed by the blood of Jesus Christ His son, made white like snow by faith in Him.

Well, the people are all, "Woe! Do you revile God's high priest?" Then Paul utters more scripture out of Ex 22:28 about not speaking evil of a ruler of your people. Notice here that we're to have respect for the office of authority over us, even if we can't respect the man; we're to respect the office. Paul said, "*Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.*" Rom 13:7 In other words, we're to respect the office of the authority even if we don't agree with the individual in that office. But that's a sub-point (important nonetheless) not the main thing I want you to see.

The main thing I want you to see at this point is the working knowledge and command of the word of God that Paul had at any given moment. He was a man that *knew* the Word of God, when he was treated contrary to the law he knew it, when he stepped outside the confines of the Word he recognized it and corrected it. How many of us can quote Ex 22:28 in the spur of the moment? Now Jesus said, "*But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.*" Mark 13:11 But here's the deal, God's Word won't pour forth *from* you if it's never been put *into* you. If you're not tucking God's Word away in your heart, then it won't be there for the Holy Spirit to issue forth in your time of need. Paul was a man who would feast on the word of God; therefore he wielded God's word powerfully, it was always right there when the need arose. and He exhorted Timothy, and along with him, you and me, "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*" 2 Tim 2:15 Or to understand that another way, "Study God's Word, Study God's Word, Study God's Word!" It's nourishment to your soul, strength to your inner man, Thy word have I word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee. How we need to know, understand and have a working knowledge of the Word of God. God wants to use your life in a powerful way, fall in love with His word, feast on His Word, allow yourself to be a vessel through which God can pour His Word, Paul was a man of the word, who loved Jesus Christ and God used his life in a radical way.

Now as for why Paul didn't know he was the high priest there's plenty of conjecture, perhaps Paul's vision was impaired as implied in the book of Galatians, could be that since in wasn't a formal convening that he wasn't wearing his official garb and so Paul didn't recognize him as the high priest, but either way when he realized what he'd done, he quickly acknowledged his respect for the office in obedience to the Word of God. Look at vs 6

Vs6-9

The Sadducees were the religious liberals, not believing in life after death, spirits, or anything like that. The Pharisees believed in all of those things, they were the fundamentalists, and though they added all kinds of legal traditions and had thoroughly missed the spirit of the law, they were definitely serious about the letter of the law. They were very passionate about the scriptures. Now there are those who think that Paul realizing the corruption of the council, the fact that he'd never get a fair trial, decided to divide a conquer, create a ruckus and slip out (so to speak), and that may be.

But it may just as well be that he simply intended on preaching the reality of the resurrected Christ to the Pharisees since they fully believed in the resurrection. So that when in vs 6 he speaks of the hope (that is the guaranteed certainty and assured expectation) and resurrection of the dead, it's quite possible that he wasn't trying to split the room so much as share with those who were open to the reality of the resurrection in the 1st place. Because the fact of the matter is that he *was* there (ultimately) because of his assertion of the fact that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead, and how that Christ was the end of the law for righteousness for all who believe. If it weren't for the resurrection of Christ, Paul wouldn't be there, he'd still be busy about his life as a Pharisee. So it would seem to me, knowing the nature of Paul that it was probably his intent to segue right into the gospel message, and that in light of the hope and resurrection of the dead, Jesus Christ *has* risen from the dead, and promises salvation and the forgiveness of sin to all who will call upon His name. But when he brought up the resurrection (in light of the vision he spoke of the day before) the Pharisees were all, "Well, if an angel or a spirit has spoken to him, we shouldn't fight against God." (Not that they were prepared to believe him, they just opposed the Sadducees that much)

So Paul was immediately placed on the back burner while these 2 parties were getting all riled up regarding their various doctrinal positions, and it obviously began to get unruly and seriously heated.

Vs 10-11

Couple things here then we'll slip into overdrive. #1 Since the Lord said, "Be of good courage." Or "Of good cheer" that tells us that Paul *discouraged*, perhaps afraid, sad, a bit depressed. Here it was, the moment he'd waited for, the chance to share with his own people, and he feels as though he blew it. "Why did I say 'Gentiles,' I had them right on the brink and I blew it, why did I snap at the high priest like that, if I'd have just kept my mouth shut." He's discouraged, despondent, a bit depressed, feels like he's blown it, hasn't really witnessed of the Lord in the way he should. But then the Lord stands by him, takes His place there with him and says, "Be encouraged Paul, you did good."

That's just like the Lord, He's always right there to encourage it when we need it the most, and so often when we find ourselves in those dark, depressing, despondent times of inner loneliness in life when we feel like we've just failed the Lord, and "God can You ever use me again?" and The Lord stands by you, encourages you, reminds you that He has a plan and a purpose for your life. *"I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."* Jer 29:11

Notice also that Jesus didn't deliver him from that cell (By the way Jesus didn't rebuke him for being there did He? There was no condemnation, only commendation.) But rather He stood by Him *in* that cell, the Lord knows where you're at, and He's promised to never leave, nor forsake you, and sometimes we find that the Lord delivers us *from* the circumstance, other times He stands by us *in* the circumstance, but He's always with us nonetheless. Nowhere is there a promise in the word of God that every trying time, or stressful circumstance will He deliver you from. Sometimes God instantly heals the terminally ill, other times He allows that disease to be the vehicle that ushers us into His presence. But He not with one more and the other less, He's always with us, never forsaking us.

The other thing we see here, 1 is encouragement, the other, assurance. "You *must* testify of Me in Rome." What does that mean? Paul's life and ministry isn't over yet, Jesus has told him he'll see Rome, so come what may, Paul can be assured he'll get to Rome because the Word of God never fails, notice.

Vs12-15

Can't fault them for their zeal, but unfortunately like a good conscience, honest zeal can't save you either, only the blood of Jesus Christ can make you clean before God. But notice how they're willing to resort to lies and deceit to accomplish their objective, that seems real godly doesn't it? But these guys are serious about killing Paul, 1 problem; Jesus said he was going to Rome... Now whose word do you suppose will prevail?

Vs16-22

Now we don't know anything about Paul's family, it's generally believed that when Paul spoke of suffering the loss of all things for Christ there in Philippians, that included in that was a disowning of him by his family when he was converted. But seeing as he was the son of a Pharisee, that means his sister was the daughter of a Pharisee, so perhaps his nephew was being schooled much as he was as a boy and just around the scene there in that way. and He's overhearing them somehow, or he comes into an awareness of what's happening and "Hey, that's my uncle Paul they're talking about."

What do we see here? God working supernaturally through the practical, this is nothing less than the providential hand of God at work. and So often we miss God's supernatural work because we're not looking for it in practical ways, we attribute that to chance, but with the believer we know there's no such thing as chance. God set this up to protect His servant Paul, and notice that Paul didn't say, "Don't worry about me, the Lord's promised to protect me and make sure I get to Rome." He saw God's hand in this and took advantage of the practical situation, "Don't take me to the doctor I'm believing in God for my healing." You ever stop to think that perhaps it's God who's leading you to utilize modern medicines and the doctors understanding of the human frame? God will move supernaturally in practical ways, don't miss it, we're too often in lala land when it comes to the moving of God because we're looking for something way out there, but God wants to minister to you right where you're at, in the practical.

Vs23-35

Which was a palace on the shore of the Mediterranean, escorted by night by 470 soldiers for about 35 miles and then the rest of the way by the horsemen, them boys must've got pretty hungry, Paul's going to make it to Rome and Rome's going to pay for the trip. Of course Claudius made himself look good, he didn't rescue Paul when he learned he was a Roman, he took him in custody and when he learned he was a Roman he quickly refrained from having him scourged and unbound him since he had done so illegally. But I wanted you to see once again that God was in control, it didn't matter what storm arose in the waters of Paul the apostles life, the Lord was going to see him through and accomplish His plan for his life, which in this case was to get him to Rome. and The same thing holds true for you, God loves you, has a plan for you, and will accomplish those things *in* you, He who has begun a good work in you, will be faithful to complete it, so wherever you may be, be it a dark or depressing time, or whatever, know that the Lord is with you, and that He'll never leave nor forsake you, He's there with you...take courage, be of good cheer, let the Lord renew, refresh and encourage your life today.

Perhaps you're in a position where you simply need to let the Lord have your life today, you've never surrendered to Jesus Christ and given Him your heart. Sincerity, zeal, and a good conscience aren't enough to commend you to God, you need the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to your life. Jesus was in all ways tempted as we are tempted and yet with out sin, but He willingly became sin for us upon the cross so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. He can wash you white like snow and make you brand new right here, right now, today.

Prayer Points: Lord thank You that You never leave us nor forsake us, but that You stand by us, uphold us and encourage us. Help us Lord to be sensitive to Your Spirit, that we might have a good conscience before You, not violating the standard of Your word rightly divided. and Help us to *study* You word, that we might know it, have a working knowledge of it, wielding your word with power, precision and compassion, change us Lord, make us more like You.