

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday August 6, 2023

Lesson 16: The Trials of Apostle Paul – Part 1: From Jerusalem to Caesarea

Reference: Acts 21:27-23:35

When we last saw Paul, he concluded his third missionary journey, arriving in Jerusalem before Pentecost with the offerings from various churches in Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia to support the struggling saints in the city. Upon his arrival, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem helped Paul restore some credibility with the Jewish Christians by asking Paul to lead the cleansing ceremony for the Nazarite vow of four men, demonstrating that Paul is not against Jewish customs as alleged by trouble-making Jews.

Timeline – Acts 21:27-23:35

Although Paul followed the advice of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, his gesture was not enough to satisfy his enemies who recognized him from Ephesus (cf Acts 19:23-41). Just a few years earlier, Paul's ministry in Ephesus led to financial loss for the merchants who sell charms and shrines of the goddess Artemis, whose main temple resides in the city (Acts 19:35). The merchants whipped up a frenzy, drawing the residents – including Jews – into a riot against the Christian movement (the Way). Paul's traveling companions were caught up in the riot as victims, though Paul himself escaped injury under the advice of the local disciples (Acts 19:30).

The Riots that led to the Arrest (Acts 21:27-30)

Fast forward to the summer of AD58 – seven days after Pentecost, some of these same Jews who recognized Paul from Ephesus proceeded to stir up the crowd against him. Back in Ephesus, Luke noted how the crowd had rioted without a known purpose, except only to riot against the Christian movement (Acts 19:32-33). The Jews in that city resented Paul for the influence he had over the Jewish community, and thus was willing to go along with the rioters to attack Paul and the Christian movement. The facts were irrelevant. Here in Jerusalem, these same Jews effectively used the same tactic, making up stories and adopting anything negative they can think of – even if it is false (21:29) – in order to rile up the crowd.

- Trophimus the Ephesian (21:29) – Trophimus was a Gentile believer from Ephesus whom Paul allegedly led into the Temple complex. This allegation was false. Trophimus may have wandered into the Temple area out of ignorance, but Paul did not lead him in (21:29). In all likelihood, he was not in the Temple area at all.
- False prophet from Egypt (21:38) – According to Josephus the historian, a false prophet from Egypt had recently led thousands of people in the city to revolt against the Roman rule in the early administrations of Felix (procurator of Judea – AD52-59). When Felix met him with a heavy Roman infantry, the whole population rallied behind the false prophet, leading to a major clash. During this clash, the false prophet fled with a handful of men while most of his followers were killed or captured; the rest of the mob then scattered.

The Jews from Ephesus succeeded in riling up the crowd into a mob, attacking Paul, beating him in the attempt to kill him (21:30-31). Much like in Ephesus, Luke noted how the crowd were doing so without any known reasons except just to attack (21:34). This uprising created a problem for the commander of the Roman cohort, who was tasked with keeping peace in the city. In response, the commander ordered for the arrest of Paul (21:33), believing Paul to be the false prophet from Egypt who had started the riot in the city years earlier (21:38).

Paul defends his ministry (21:37-22:21)

After Paul corrected the commander's misunderstanding, he sought and received permission from the commander to speak to the mob, hoping that truth and context can calm the crowd (cf Peter Acts 11:1-18). Paul recognized that he had been misunderstood by multiple crowds, with each crowd driven by emotions arising out of different contexts. He had already learned from the church leaders that the Jews of Jerusalem misunderstood him for the events of Acts 15, he knows about the unpersuaded Jews from Ephesus and their motives, and he also needed to deal with the sensitivities of the other Jews caught in the frenzy of the cult of the Egyptian false prophet. He had been bound and struck by these Jews in a mob frenzy that led to his arrest by the Gentile courts – fulfilling the prophecy of Agabus (Acts 21:11).

Since the crowd never had a chance to hear his side of the story, Paul felt the need to speak to the crowd and present his defense (Acts 22:1-21). His defense and his rationale for his ministry can be summarized by the following outline:

- Life before Christ (22:1-5) – Paul reminded the audience that he is himself a Jew, and was once a persecutor of the Christian movement; and that all the leaders of the Jewish council can easily testify to this fact. He even invoked his mentor – Gamaliel – who was a highly respected leader in the Sanhedrin. He also reminded them that he was educated “strictly according to the laws of our fathers” (22:3). It has been nearly 20 years since he was seen as a rising star among the Jewish Council, someone with a bright future as a potential member of the Sanhedrin. Paul offered his resume as a reminder of his credentials to those who doubt his Jewish heritage and identity. He wasn't just another Jew; he was a star.
- Encounter with Christ (22:6-16) – Paul then transitioned to his testimony about his personal encounter with Christ – a supernatural encounter that included a specific calling (22:10) that the Jews in the audience would've recognized from their knowledge of the callings of the Old Testament prophets. As a testimony and a witness to this calling, he invoked the name of another well respected and devout Jew in the person of Ananias (22:12), who also received the divine message to validate Paul's salvation experience (22:14-15).
- Ministry in Christ (22:17-21) – Paul then described his actions following his conversion, reminding the Jewish audience that he once stood over and approve of the stoning death of Stephen. However, his actions then were in conflict with the message of the One True God, who had told him that his own brethren would no longer accept him (22:18), sending him to preach to the Gentiles (22:21).

Paul's Unjust Punishment under Roman Law (22:22-30)

In declaring his ministry in Christ, Paul said things that may not have been politically smart, given the state and emotions of the audience at the time. He effectively indicted the Jewish leaders (20:17-21) for rejecting his supernatural conversion at the time (cf Acts 9:29-30), leading the crowd – who may have been intrigued by his testimony for the moment – to once again call for his death (22:22-23).

Sensing the crowd approaching the state of rioting again, the commander ordered Paul to be questioned under the punishment of scourging. The commander merely wanted to know why the Jews hated Paul so much. Unfortunately for the commander, he did not realize that Paul was a Roman citizen. Roman citizens are not to be punished without trial, as doing so would lead the person who ordered the punishment to be himself under trial (22:29). Moreover, to the commander's shock, not only was Paul a Roman citizen, but he also didn't acquire his citizenship by way of a purchase in the same manner that the commander acquired his citizenship. This allowed for no loophole for the punishment Paul had already received under his watch. Paul was thus immediately released. However, still curious over why the Jews hated Paul so much, the commander ordered the chief priests and the Sanhedrin to assemble in order to hear the arguments (22:30).

Paul's "Trial" Before the Sanhedrin (23:1-11)

Though technically not a trial since it wasn't called by the Sanhedrin, not meeting inside the temple complex, and not following various other trial protocols, what the commander demanded was effectively a trial, for all intents and purposes. Paul was accused of having violated Jewish law – a matter to which was beyond the commander's knowledge or responsibility. Since this wasn't technically a trial, Paul did not know he was speaking to the high priest, violating the protocols of a trial in the Sanhedrin (23:3-5). Moreover, it has been over 20 years since he was acquainted with anyone in the Sanhedrin, so Paul likely did not know who the high priest was by this time. Also, since this "trial" was not held in the temple complex, the high priest likely wasn't wearing his full priestly garment, making it difficult to know that he was the high priest. The high priest himself also violated protocol, denying Paul's right to speak, leading Paul to rebuke him (in effect, he wasn't acting like a high priest). Speaking evil of the high priest would have violated Exodus 22:28, which was a practice held tightly by Jewish customs. Paul was likely genuinely in regret (23:5).

Moving beyond his regret, Luke noted to his readers that Paul adopted a divide-and-conquer approach to his predicament (23:6a). Knowing that he is in a no-win scenario with the audience, he chose to focus on one truth about Christ to which he preaches that has divided the Pharisees and Sadducees – the issue of resurrection (See also supplemental – Pharisees vs Sadducees).

Paul again reminded the audience that he is a Pharisee, and a son of a Pharisee. He wants the audience to know that he still considers himself a Pharisee, but one who has effectively seen the light and knows the truth of what Scripture said about Christ. Specifically, the hope that Christ's death and resurrection brings to the people of the world. The best hope is to help others see the light; but at a minimum, the approach achieved its goal of taking Paul out of the center of attention (23:8-10). The situation began to get out of hand, leading the commander to again take Paul away from the crowd and into his protective custody.

That evening, the LORD spoke to Paul to provide courage and assurance that He is with him; that Paul's next stop will be Rome and that he should continue to speak as God's witness (23:11).

Path towards Imprisonment in Caesarea (23:12-24:27)

The Jew's hatred for Paul was so strong that as many as forty Jews made a vow to kill Paul (23:12-13). According to Josephus, during the administration of Felix the procurator (i.e., governor), people routinely hired the Sicarii (basically, assassins) to assassinate their enemies. The Sicarii were originally an extremist faction of the Jewish community who used cloak-and-dagger methods to rid Israel of those they considered enemies. By the time of Felix (AD 52-59), they degenerated to basically becoming hired assassins. It is unknown if these forty were formerly members of this sect – who embraces this practice – or if they were hired help. Point being that during this period, this practice is not uncommon. Thus, the plot to kill Paul was conceived and presented to the high priest and elders of the Sanhedrin (23:14).

Luke did not report on the Sanhedrin's reaction to this plot, only that the plot was foiled when the Roman commander – who we now know as Claudius Lysias (23:26) – learned of the plot and decided to move Paul to Caesarea under heavy guard (protection). Caesarea was the administrative and judicial capital for Rome over all of Judea during this time (cf Acts 10:1). In this act to transfer protection of Paul to Caesarea, Lysias included a letter to governor Felix, deceptively written with altered timeline of events to absolve himself of the crime of punishing a Roman citizen without trial (23:27). However, he did insert his judgment that, after hearing the evidences, he believes Paul had committed no crime against Rome deserving of death or imprisonment (23:28-29). He then inferred that, since his judgment was not satisfactory to the rioters, he is sending Paul to Felix to be tried under his (Felix's) discretion (23:30).

According to Josephus, Felix had his soldiers track down the Sicarii and those accused to be Jewish zealots virtually every day and immediately executed them, many of them by crucifixion. It is possible – if not likely – that this knowledge factored into Lysias' thinking (23:30) when he decided to transfer Paul to Caesarea. Protecting Paul from these assassins may be a responsibility that he did not want to take on.

Analysis – Acts 21:27 – 23:35: Responding to Criticisms in Ministry

The main lessons from these events leading into the arrest and the mock trials of the Apostle Paul focuses on how Paul reacted to these events. Luke informed his readers that those who started these problems for Paul were the troublemaking Jews from Ephesus. The Jews in Jerusalem seemed indifferent until they were caught up in the frenzy. **The question is why? ... and how?** It is worth noting that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem did not come to Paul's defense during these riots; not even the leaders of the church.

Much like the rioting in Ephesus, the rioters were riled up to such a degree where many do not even know why they were rioting (Acts 19:32; 21:34). Paul had been accused of preaching against the Jewish tradition (21:28), defiling the temple with Gentiles (21:29), and being associated with the Egyptian false prophet (21:38). Thus, the key to understanding the why and the how is to observe the people's reaction after Paul made his defense (22:1-21). Luke informed his readers that the audience was generally receptive to allow Paul to speak (22:2), and they seemed to remain calm until Paul told them about his calling to evangelize to the Gentiles (22:21). It was at that point that the crowd began shouting and rioting again (22:22). Anti-Gentile sentiment in the temple was evidently very strong in the City at this time, stirred upon by false allegations involving Trophimus (21:29).

As it relates to the Sanhedrin, it was clear that the Jewish leaders were looking for reasons to trap Paul for violating Jewish customs while denying him the right to defend himself (23:1-4). Paul's response was telling, as he wasn't going to entertain their deceptive strategy to be trapped, choosing to highlight a topic which he preaches on that the Jewish leaders themselves could not agree on (23:6).

When we act upon our calling to achieve the Great Commission, criticisms will come. They will come in all directions and in some cases, they may be violent. The lesson here is on how we respond to these criticisms. Based on Paul's responses to these two different groups of critics, the following principles can be observed:

- **When mass criticisms are random and without focus, remind ourselves of our calling.**
The first principle focuses on our own well-being. Criticisms without focus are impossible to respond to. When such criticisms reach a fever pitch, it can often discourage us and derail us from our ministry responsibilities to the point where we would be tempted to simply call it quits. To help himself maintain a level of sanity and focus, Paul simply recounted his salvation experience that led to his calling. This recounting helped him maintain focus for why he does what he does, in spite of all the criticisms – fair or unfair. When we find ourselves in a similar situation, go back and recount our salvation experience unto our calling to help us maintain focus on our Great Commission work. Let our salvation experience and our calling be our encouragement.
- **When mass criticisms are random and without focus, seek truth by observing the reactions.**
The second principle focuses on understanding the audience. People will criticize – many times unreasonably; this is a reality. However, when criticisms increase in intensity that is driven by random complaints over seemingly trivial matters (in and of themselves), often times, the audience wouldn't know why they are criticizing – or even rioting. Such is the case here with Paul. As the saying goes – context matters! Especially historical context. In Paul's case, anti-Gentile sentiment was strong, and it may or may not be related to the recent history in the city with a Gentile false prophet. Truth is oftentimes the best cleansing agent. Note that seeking truth was the goal of the Roman commander,

who was tasked with maintaining peace in the City. Moreover, the Roman commander acted as an objective defendant and protector of Paul, constantly seeking truth in his attempt to bring about peace. When we encounter similar circumstances, seek to model after the Roman commander's actions of pursuing truth while defending the innocent.

- **When mass criticisms are random and without focus, expose the troublemakers.**

The final principle focuses on those who sow seeds of division and discord. Luke informs us that the rioting crowd that confronted Paul were spurred upon by troublemakers from out of town that had personal issues with Paul. Using falsehoods and slander, they stirred the crowd in order to achieve their agenda. Such is the characteristics of troublemakers... they have an agenda, and they would use whatever means – to include falsehoods and slander – to achieve their agenda. When we find ourselves with a similar situation as Paul, look for the troublemakers and expose them. As Paul discovered, the troublemakers are not interested in giving him a fair hearing. Paul need only to expose them and let God handle the rest. Exposing them will help to get to the truth.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read Matthew 26:47-67. This is the episode where Jesus was arrested and was tried before the Sanhedrin

1. What similarities and differences can we observe about the experience Jesus went through with what Paul went through in today's lesson?
2. Compare and contrast Paul's reaction to the Sanhedrin, to Jesus' reaction to the same body. Why did Jesus respond the way he did?
3. Who were the troublemakers in this account with Jesus? How did Jesus respond?

Reflecting Upon our World

Disagreements in ministry philosophy and even ministry activities often lead to criticisms in our church context. The goal is to not allow the disagreements to reach a fever peach that divides the body.

1. Evaluate how your church handles disagreements in ministry philosophy or activities. What are some preventive measures your church has in place to ensure unity of the body in spite of disagreements?
2. Evaluate how your church handles troublemakers – defined as those with an agenda apart from the church's mission or identity – who causes discords and disunity among the members. What preventive measures does your church have to guard against their agendas?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

As this lesson demonstrates, following God's will is easy when everything is peaceful. Following God's will become increasingly more difficult when God's will is pitted against the world.

1. Reflect on a time when you were heavily criticized – rightly or wrongly – for your efforts in work or in ministry. How did you respond to those criticism? Did you feel the urge to quit? Did you wish you could have someone objective to defend your position? Journal our experience in light of how Paul responded from today's lesson.
2. Reflect on a time when you observed someone else being heavily criticized – rightly or wrongly. What was your level of engagement in that instance? Were you an active participant or a passive observer? Were you pursuing truth or were you following the crowd? If God puts you in a similar situation today, how would you respond (differently)? Journal your reflection in prayer form to be prepared to act objectively with a focus on truth.
3. Spend some time to recount your own salvation experience leading into your calling. Put this in a testimonial form and set it aside for times when you experience intense attacks. Follow Paul's example and use it as encouragement to keep doing what God wants you to do.