

Series: Acts 11: Jerusalem

Sunday March 27th 2022

Message: Week 5- On Trial for Hope

- *Last week we explored a story of two men. The first was the commander of the Roman Garrison in Jerusalem, in AD 57- he about to oversee the torture of the second person - the Apostle Paul.*
- *Story revolves around BOTH men's status as Roman citizens, but the way they became citizens couldn't have been more different. The Roman commander had purchased his citizenship, while Paul was born a citizen, inheriting the status of his father.*
- *We used this story as a lens to consider OUR status as citizens of God's Kingdom- a citizenship we also inherited, by a new birth into a living hope as God's Children through our response of faith.*
- *Today, as we cross into Acts chapter 23, we see a story of three relationships:*
 - *Relationship between Paul and the High Priest of the temple, a man named Ananias*
 - *The relationship between the two parties of Jerusalem's religious ruling body, the Sanhedrin- these are the Pharisees and the Sadducees... AND*
 - *The relationship between Paul and GOD.*
- *This is a story of high drama, violence, and a miraculous revelation. As such this story- while interesting- can seem far removed in relevance from our own lives.*
- *But the story is indeed relevant, for the principles seen in these three relationships are also principles at work in our own relationships today.*
 - *Our relationships with adversaries/conflict*
 - *Our relationship to the events in which we find ourselves caught,*
 - *And, most importantly, our relationship with God.*
- *SO- story picks up with our Roman commander still trying to determine the cause of the riot surround Paul. Maintaining the peace of the city is his chief responsibility, and the peace in Jerusalem is very fragile.*
- *SO, since he's afraid to get anything out of Paul, he turns to the leaders of the crowd- the Sanhedrin.*

Acts 22:30 *The commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews. So the next day he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the members of the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.*

- *Considering what's about to happen, we need to think about this scene here.*
- *It's been not quite 30 years since Jesus' death and resurrection. Some of the members of the Sanhedrin would have been serving at that time. Every member, including the high priest, was alive then, and at most one generation removed. Many of these men would have succeeded their own fathers in their role on the Sanhedrin.*
- *SO, what had these men- this religious ruling body- witnessed first hand? What to them- and most of the people of Jerusalem- was COMMON KNOWLEDGE?*

† **Common knowledge?**

- *Resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus.*
- *FIRST- Teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus*
- *Pentecost. Rise of the church. Healing of the crippled man in the initial months after the resurrection.*

- *How Peter, John, and the Apostles responded with courage to the beatings, imprisonment, and persecution they endured.*
- *The widespread phenomenon of healings performed by the apostles on the Temple Mount in the first year of the church.*
- *The nature of the church itself, how it was viewed favorably by the people of Jerusalem, how it grew quickly despite continued resistance and persecution.*
- *The conversion of their greatest weapon, Paul.*
- *How the Christian movement- the way- was rapidly spreading across the Mediterranean world.*
- *All of this was KNOWN to them- it was common knowledge... and now PAUL HIMSELF is standing before them- fearless, full of courage.*
- *Question, WHY DIDN'T THEY BELIEVE? Faced with the overwhelming evidence of the truth and genuineness of everything Paul said, how could they NOT believe?*
- *Probably doctoral dissertations written on this, but it boils down to one word... PRIDE.*
- *For these men to believe would require them to lay down- release- their core source of identity, power, influence, and security. It would have required them to reconsider their own believe system, and confess they were WRONG about what had defined their very lives. It would have required deep and humble surrender to the TRUTH which would change their lives, but in doing so would call them to lay down the concept of life they were fighting so hard to protect.*
- *The urge to protect our preconceived notions and entrenched way of thinking is a POWERFUL THING, and it can cause us to miss- as was the case for these men- the clear evidence of what God is doing in our midst.*
- *As we saw last week, this story stands as a call to the church today for humility, love, and a willingness to listen and think as we consider how God is at work in our own lives- own midst today.*
- **CONTINUE.**

✠ A matter of conscience

Acts 23:1 *Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day."*

- *Just a note- For Paul- and the the New Testament, the integrity of our Conscience is a big deal.*
- 2 Corinthians 1:12** *Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace.*
- *Paul says "if we have anything to boast about, it is that our conscience is clear before God, because we have acted with integrity, sincerity, and relying upon God's Grace"*
 - *To live with a clear conscience before God and people is a source of great inner peace- this is a gift scripture calls us to know and experience.*

- **When Paul said this to the Sanhedrin, his message was twofold. Note Paul says “My Brothers”- he is identifying himself as one of them- “I’m not your adversary- I’m one of you! Everything I’ve done has been under God’s leadership- my conscience before God is clear”**
- **What Paul didn’t say was also clear- these men claimed to also be acting out of duty to God, but based on their actions, their conscience before God was NOT clear.**
- **This didn’t go over well... and it leads to a fascinating confrontation between...**

✠ Ananias and Paul

Acts 23:2-5 *At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth.*

- **In the first century the office of High Priest in Jerusalem was as much political as it was religious. The high priest was the main representative of the Jewish people to the Roman authorities, and as such their loyalties could be questioned, if not corrupted. The high priest who condemned Jesus was Caiaphas, and Ananias is the 8th high priest since then- there was a lot of turnover.**
- **For his part, Ananias was described by one historian as “a violent, haughty, gluttonous, and rapacious man”- he was actually arrested and sent for trial to Rome in AD 52, accused of sedition- but was found innocent and returned to Jerusalem, where he resumed his role as High Priest until the outbreak of the Jewish revolts against Rome- just a few years away.**
- **SO, For Ananias Paul represented everything he was not- and he could not tolerate Paul’s claim of innocence before God, as Paul’s innocence clearly revealed HIS guilt. AND SO, he orders Paul to be struck.**
- **NOW, there’s a little controversy over what happens now, but I’m in the camp that Paul finally- even briefly- had enough and lost his temper.**

³ *Then Paul said to him, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!”*

- **To call someone a ‘whitewashed wall’ was a huge insult, maybe even a curse. It meant a person was superficially clean on the outside, but hollow, defiled, and insecure on the inside. In Matthew 23 Jesus said something similar, accusing this same group of being like ‘Whitewashed tombs’- clean on the outside, but rotting on the inside...**

Matthew 23:27 *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.*

- **So Paul doesn’t hold back. But now the story takes a twist...**

⁴ *Those who were standing near Paul said, “How dare you insult God’s high priest!”* ⁵ *Paul replied, “Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: ‘Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.’”*

- **OK- some commentators here accuse Paul of not owning what he said- pretending he didn’t know who Ananias was. But it’s very likely that even if Paul knew the High Priests name, he had never physically seen Ananias. Ananias became the High Priest in AD 48, the year of the Jerusalem Council, which was the last time Paul was in Jerusalem, save a very brief visit to the church elders between his 2nd and 3rd journey.**

- *In any case, the point here is that once Paul recognizes who Ananias is, even though Ananias fully WAS what Paul accused him of being, PAUL APOLOGIZES.*
- *The contrast here couldn't be more stark. PAUL KNOWS the law is no longer necessary, and yet he still respects its teaching.*
- *Ananias and the Sanhedrin proclaim the law is absolutely necessary- mandatory- and yet they do not respect what it teaches.*
- *This illustrates one of the greatest NT themes in all Paul's writings- that the law- religious and moral rules- have NO POWER to bring about true change and transformation- what matters- what is necessary- is a change of our HEART, so that our keeping of God's moral teaching is no longer a requirement, it is the RESPONSE of a changed heart- of our new identity and new source of life.*
- *One last detail about Ananias- even though Paul apologized for what he said, it turns out his words against Ananias were prophetic (God will strike you down). Ananias had a very cozy relationship with the Roman authorities, and within a few years of this event he will be targeted- and assassinated- by a group of Jewish zealots seeking to overthrow Rome's occupation of Israel.*
- *But moving on... Here Paul stands before the Sanhedrin, slightly humbled, and desiring to make Christ known. AND SO, with just a touch of cunning, Paul proclaims the truth of why he is there, and in such a way that will take the Sanhedrin's attention off of him, and place it on each other.*
- *You see, the Sanhedrin was a two party body, composed of the Pharisees and Sadducees- and they did not like each other.*

† The Pharisees and Sadducees

Acts 23:6-10 *Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead."* ⁷ *When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.* ⁸ *(The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.)*

⁹ *There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"* ¹⁰ *The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.*

- *Let's talk about the Pharisees and Sadducees just a minute.*
- *The Pharisees were deeply devout and sincere in their worship of God. They believed there would be a resurrection of the dead, they believed God was present and active in the Spiritual world, and they believed worship of God through the Law and Temple System was the most important thing in life.*
- *AND YET, for them, their ability to be a PART OF GOD, to be RIGHT WITH GOD, all was contingent on HOW WELL THEY KEPT THE LAW.*
- *So, while they were sincerely devout in their devotion to God, when it came to how they lived, life was centered on themselves.*

- *The Sadducees, on the other hand, were more of a political body. While giving lip service to the law and Temple traditions, their focus was on the economic and political matters impacting Jerusalem and Israel. They believed in God, but didn't believe God was actively present, and the concept of resurrection was irrelevant at best and negative at worst.*
- *SO, while externally they operated within the religious construct of the Law and Temple system, when it came down to how they actually lived, life was centered on themselves.*
- *So while the Pharisees and Sadducees looked at Paul from very different perspectives, they shared the self-centeredness blinding them to the clear evidence of what God was doing.*
- *Again, the image here is stark. While these religious factions are consumed with how they disagree, the Truth of what God is doing stands patiently off to the side. Good thing that never happens in Christianity...*
- *AND SO, Paul is ushered back into the safety of the barracks. And now we see the third relationship in this story... the relationship between PAUL AND GOD.*

✠ Paul and God

Acts 23:11 *The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."*

- *Think about what this must have meant to Paul. It has not been an easy few weeks. He has been beaten, rejected by his own people, and even with his claim of Roman citizenship, his life still hangs in the balance.*
- *In this place of great vulnerability and need, God meets him.*
- *In 2nd Peter 1 we see one of the most succinct expressions of a powerful New Testament principle. That we are NOT ALONE, God knows us, he is with us, and provides for us. Speaking of Jesus, Peter says...*

2 Peter 1:3 *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*

- *Note the verb tense here. Through His divine power- His presence- Jesus ALREADY HAS GIVEN US everything we need for a godly life.*
- *In other words, we have already received everything we need to remain faithful, to be at peace, to not lose hope, to live out of love, and stand with courage.*
- *And so when God spoke to Paul, in reality he was giving Paul something he already had....*

God provided Paul

• COURAGE

- *I've got to think that in this moment Paul remembered God's ancient promise to Joshua and the Israelites, from the scriptures he knew so well... "Be strong and courageous... The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."*

• REASSURANCE

- *Paul- Your work up to this point- what has just happened to you here- You've done this for me- You've been faithful to me, you will fulfill the task I'm giving.*

- **PURPOSE**

– *Just as you've testified to me here in Jerusalem, you're going to do the same in Rome. Even if the situation seems impossible right now, you can trust me- this isn't the end of my work through you.*

– *But perhaps most of all, God provided Paul with...*

- **His PRESENCE**

– *Alone and in a place of great darkness, God reminded Paul of the greatest light he already had- the presence of Jesus himself.*

– *This would be a great place to end this sermon. When we are in helpless and in darkness, God is present and he does not fail to provide.*

– *But for some of you, including myself, an inevitable question arises here. YES, God did this for Paul, in a miraculous way. That was wonderful for Paul.... but*

‡ Okay... but what about *now*?

– *Why doesn't God speak to me this way?*

– *I mean, if God spoke to me in a vision, audibly, and referenced the details of my life, gave me direction, and reassured me of what is to come- I WOULD BELIEVE! I would be encouraged, obedient, and faithful.*

– *Two things- FIRST is the oft said notion that if people would just see miracles- if God would just work in this way again today, then people- including ourselves- would believe. But this simply isn't true. History and human nature don't bear this out, and today's story is a prime example. If there ever was a body with a front row seat to the miraculous work of God, it was the Sanhedrin of Paul's day. And yet they rejected Christ, his message, and his messenger.*

– *In the human condition, what we want- demand- is for God to prove himself in a way that doesn't require faith.*

– *But without faith, sight alone will never lead us to God... AND, when we demand SIGHT to verify our FAITH, we can be easily deceived by charlatans and religious con-men. Unfortunately many examples of this today.*

– *But secondly- and this is the good news- God DOES still work this way today.*

Reality! God still provides His disciples with courage, reassurance, purpose, and His presence. He does so through **SCRIPTURE**, and by our **FAITH**.

– *Over the past two weeks I've walked alongside a family in the most tragic set of events I've been part of in my 18 years as a pastor. Across these days the spirit has brought multiple scriptures to mind, but one has been...*

1 Corinthians 16:13 *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.*

– *Church- when life reveals to us just how weak we really are, the only way we can be courageous, strong, and stand firm is by FAITH. One step at a time, choosing to believe the gift of God's presence and goodness revealed to us in scripture in a thousand different ways.*

- *And IF WE LOOK/see with eyes of faith, we will indeed see the evidence of the miraculous all around us.*
- *In the midst of great struggle, grief, anxiety.. when a person holds on to their hope in Christ, not falling to despair, that is not from human nature- that is miracle.*
- *When a person does fall into despair, and others come alongside them with compassion, patience, support, and love... THAT is a miracle, for that is not of our human nature.*
- *When people show kindness and love- even when that kindness is costly and sacrificial- that is a miracle, for it is not of our human nature*
- *When we as believers allow the Holy Spirit to show us areas in our own life where we need to surrender, to be humbled, to learn, to experience healing and growth.... And we DO THIS... that is a miracle, for it requires us to lay down our pride, and to lay down our pride is not of our human nature.*
- *When our expressions of worship TO GOD lead to expressions of God's nature THROUGH US... that is a miracle, for this is not of our human nature!*
- *And WHEREVER each of us may be in our lives today... when we BELIEVE AND RECEIVE the good of God's Truth, revealed to us through scripture, through other people, and through the work of Jesus Himself in our hearts....*
- *God WILL provide us everything we need for life and we will experience his goodness, courage, reassurance, purpose, and presence, right now*