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Acts 22:22-23:11

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Turn to Acts 23. Seven more weeks we will be in the book of Acts and with that we will have gone through in the last couple of years the book of Luke and the book of Acts. We did a study of the book of Galatians in between that. Do y’all remember that? That was a really short study compared to these other two. But Luke and Acts are huge works in the Bible; big volumes of Scripture. Luke is long. In my daily Bible reading week before last, for a couple of days there I was reading Luke. I’ve been trying to do ten chapters in a daily reading. If you do that, you read through the Bible about three times in a year. It is awesome when you’re reading something like Jude or Philippians because you understand everything and the chapters are like eighteen verses. Then, you get to Luke and there are something like sixty or seventy verse chapters. It’s long. As a church, we have worn y’all out with these two big studies so in seven weeks, when this ends, we’re going to go into a short standalone series that won’t be a study through a book of the Bible. Occasionally, we will do that but not very often. We will let you know here soon what that’s going to be and then after that we will follow up with a book study and we will study through another book of the Bible. We want to study through Romans but we’re going to wait until Jesus comes back and do it together with the original Author. So, that’s what we’re thinking.

So, we’ve got to back up into Acts 22 but before we do that I want to do something to prepare us for worship. Paul’s words in Ephesians 1 that Shawn was sharing—it’s such a good chapter. It’s one of my favorite chapters. Ephesians 1 & 2 and Romans 8 are probably my favorite chapters in the Bible. There is a point in Ephesians 1, right before the passage Shawn read, that says that God adopts us in love according to the purpose of His will. I think it’s important that when you show up at church on Sunday or when you roll out in the morning and get ready to go to work—this is true for all of us—you need to think about the fact that God’s salvation that He’s given to you is a gift that has with it an attached purpose and will. He’s got a will for your life. This is not a random relationship.

I’ve got a bazillion random relationships in my life. I can walk down the street in about any southeastern city and run into somebody that I loosely know or am associated with. You know what I mean? You have those little games you play while trying to figure out who this person is who clearly knows you. You recognize them but you don’t recognize them. Anybody else have that happen? Logan raised her hand. That’s because you arrested them. But you are trying to get through this conversation. I have little exercises I do, like, “Hey, man, how’s things going over at the …?” and try to get them to finish a sentence or something, you know? I’m trying to figure out who this person is. It happens to me a lot. It happens a good bit. I was walking down the street over in Asheville yesterday. I had to go to Hendersonville and stopped at PF Chang’s. I love to eat there, y’all. I ain’t going to lie. When it’s Pastor Appreciation Month, y’all need to get me some gift cards to PF Chang’s. But anyway, Lailee and I were walking down the street and this guy pulls up, “Hey, man, what’s up?” He starts talking to us and I’m like, “I know I recognize this guy. I just can’t think of who he is.” He was my first cousin. It took me a little while to figure it out because I’ve got a bunch of cousins. Y’all know how mountain families are; there’s banjo music and the whole deal.

But when God is looking at you, He has specific purpose for your life. He understands all the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of your life. One of the things that is so refreshing in the text tonight is that God is going to give Paul what he needs in the moment and it’s going to be a powerful moment between Paul and God. You need that moment in your life and I need that moment in my life more times than not. We have those moments where God gives us what we need in a moment that reminds us of things like: He’s in charge, He has purpose, He called me out of darkness into light, He saves us because He loves us. All these powerful truths that we sort of grow numb to.

So, before we go into the text, I want to just take a minute for us to prepare our hearts to hear the Word of the Lord. That’s worship. We tend to say that we had worship and we associate that with singing. But to hear the teaching of the Word of God and to do the corporate reading like we do, that’s worship. I want to take about two minutes here and just prepare our hearts for worship through personal confession of sin. In the quiet of your seat, get alone with God and prepare your heart to receive the Word of God. The Bible says in Hebrews that our God is a consuming fire and it’s a dreadful thing to come into His presence with a heart that’s not ready. In Hebrews 10, He warns us against an unready heart that takes certain things too lightly, and insults the Spirit of grace, and tramples underfoot the blood of the covenant that sanctifies us. So, take a minute. If you’re here and you’re a Christian, prepare your heart for worship. If you’re not a Christian, then just hang out and enjoy watching us do family stuff here. We are glad to have you as a family guest but also, just to let the secret out, we want you to become a Christian, so we’re praying God will save you. You are welcome here. But those of us who are believers, let’s prepare our hearts for worship. Take a minute and then I’ll pray.

Dear heavenly Father, we thank you for the opportunity to open your Word tonight. I thank you for the opportunity to worship with your people and to gather together. Many have driven a long way to be here, God, from all across this county and the tri-county area, even the tri-state area, to be a part of this fellowship of believers, this community, this body of local believers, and I pray that the fellowship would be good and that the body would be strong. I pray that tonight that we would corporately receive your Word with eager hearts, and ears, and minds, and with the humility to respond to it in whatever way you, by your Holy Spirit, guide us to respond to it. If there is somebody here tonight who doesn’t know you—they aren’t a child of God, they haven’t called on the name of the Lord for salvation, they haven’t received what Jesus offers through the gift of the Gospel—I pray that tonight that would happen. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Acts 22—we are going to back up to verse 22 and we will cross a chapter into chapter 23 tonight. So, Acts 22:22 through Acts 23:11 will be our text for tonight. So, let’s just begin reading.

Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.” 23 And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, 24 the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this.

So, what’s happened here is that this is the second trial that Paul is having to go through here because of his faith and mainly because he is preaching the Gospel to Gentiles. So, he is preaching to non-Jews and that’s against the Jewish Law, at least in their minds. It’s sort of like a racism thing. These people are sort of racist and they also have a higher view of themselves as a people than they do of non-Jews. These are very religious Jews.

Now, keep in mind that this is not like a Semitic thing. Paul was Jewish, okay, and the disciples were Jewish, so this is not like Jewish people nationally. This is Jewish people religiously. We have to be careful. I think that a lot of times through history that there has been a strong anti-Semitism towards people because they kind of lump Jews in with those who crucified Jesus. So, we have to be careful. People are people. One of the things that we learned in our study of Galatians is that God made everybody. Some folks are black and some folks are white and some folks are somewhere in between. Some people are really, really, really white. The Contis have to put on sunscreen in the shade. Then some people are really, really, really black. There are people groups from places like South Sudan who are dark, dark, and darker than other people groups. There is a variety of pigmentation in the skin. God has created people and human blood is human blood. So, there is this all-inclusiveness to the Gospel that says that all people are welcomed by the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is for all people. But the Jewish people were rejecting the fact that Paul was preaching to the Gentiles and they were all mixed up because they didn’t even realize that Paul was preaching the Gospel. They were just mad because he was going to the Gentiles. A bunch of stuff was going on and we’ve been through that the last couple of weeks.

Now, what happens here is, if you remember from last week, that the military leaders, the tribune, brings Paul out in front of the Jewish people and Paul gives a defense. Now, watch this. I learned this, this week. I never realized this—Paul would have spoken in Aramaic, which was that version of Hebrew, and the Roman tribune would probably not have understood what Paul was saying to the people. So, Paul comes out and gives a defense of the Gospel.

Now, here are some characteristics of what Paul does in his explanation of the Gospel. In the text we looked at in the last couple of weeks, Paul speaks to the Jewish people and what he does is he preaches the Gospel. He doesn’t say, “I’m innocent,” and make a legal defense, He preaches the Gospel, and he would have done it in Hebrew. Remember, there was that transition where he was doing it bilingually last week. He was speaking in Greek and they were impressed with his Greek, then he transitions over and starts preaching in Hebrew. So, all of these people are hearing, and receiving, and understanding, but the Roman military guys don’t really understand what’s being said. Then, all of a sudden, Paul says the one thing that sort of triggers this uproar and upsurge in the riot and people are flinging dust in the air. They were out of their minds with anger and they want to kill Paul. You see it right there in verse 22, “He should not be allowed to live.” So, the tribune orders him to be brought back into the barracks. He rescues Paul and brings him back into the barracks.

“…the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging.”

This is fascinating. The tribune was like, “They’re going to kill you. Let’s bring you back in here. Okay, now here’s what we are going to do—we’re going to flog you.” Now, flogging, if you’ve ever studied the crucifixion of Jesus, is not just like whipping somebody. It’s whipping somebody with one of those flagrums, the thing that has bone, and brass, and metal, and blades on it. Have you ever studied that? If you saw that movie that came out about fifteen years ago about the crucifixion of Jesus, when they’re flogging somebody they’re ripping flesh and exposing organs. It’s bad. People would die from flogging. So, the Roman tribune brings Paul in and he says, “We’re going to beat you. Those people are angry and we don’t know why. I know what—we’ll stretch you out and beat you.” It’s crazy but it’s a Roman thing. It’s Roman crazy—which is like a different kind of crazy. It was really sadistic. So, they stretched him out for the whips. They would stretch you really tight and get your skin really taut and they would start whipping you so the lacerations would be that much more intense. Then, watch what Paul says.

Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?”

So, the man who had been charged with flogging him—Paul is stretched out and he says, “Hey, man! Is it lawful for you to do this? You know I’m a Roman citizen.” Let me give you the purpose behind why Paul says that. The tribune has rescued him from the crowd and he’s getting ready to have him flogged when Paul says this. So, let me tell you the perks and rights of Roman citizenship. If you’re a Roman citizen, let me tell you the perks, and rights, and sort of some observations. Because the purpose of scourging someone was to punish them, torture them, or extract information from them, or all three. So, we’re going to torture you until you tell us what we want to know; that’s when they would flog somebody. They could have beaten him or whipped him but they’re going to torture him. This is going to be torture. So, it’s a weird twist in the story because it seems like they are kind of protecting Paul from the mob but now they’re going to flog him, okay?

So, perks and rights of Roman citizenship. Anyone in the Eastern Mediterranean during this time period who had citizenship would have been considered socially elite. Paul is considered the social elite, so when he says, “I’m a citizen,” the guy is like, “Whoa, whoa!” There’s a big status with that. Roman citizens were entitled to the protection against accusations of non-citizens. All these Jews that are mad and want Paul killed are non-citizens. They are creating a riot. Now, the guys are going to beat Paul and Paul is like, “I’m a citizen,” and the centurion, who is a ranking officer who would have been in charge of a hundred soldiers, looks at his boss and is like, “What are we going to do? We can’t do this.” That’s why; because a non-citizen could not bring an accusation against a Roman citizen. Also, Roman citizens were protected from extreme forms of punishment. So, if you were a Roman citizen you could get punished but you could not get extremely punished. You got time out and stuff like that but you didn’t get flogged. You could be punished and there were prison sentences, certainly there were Roman citizens in Roman prisons, but this far out and away from Rome, flogging was kept for non-citizens. It was illegal to beat a Roman citizen without the benefit of a trial. Now, keep in mind that we have not had a trial yet. A Roman trial looked a lot like an American trial, or a British trial, or pretty much any European trial, where you had to have representation, a judge, lawyers, attorneys, and a prosecutor. We haven’t seen that happen yet. What we’ve had is basically a public hearing that turned into crazy mob insanity. So, you couldn’t beat a Roman citizen without the benefit of a trial and Roman citizens were exempt from extreme capital punishment such as crucifixion. So, a Roman citizen could be executed by capital punishment but not through extreme measures. For instance, Roman officers who were executed were beheaded because that was considered an honorable killing in the Roman system. Roman citizens could not be interrogated by means of torture and a Roman citizen could insist on a trial in Italy rather than in the provinces. So, a Roman citizen could say, “Before you beat me, I want a trial and I want it in Rome. So, get me a boat ticket. We are getting on the ship and we are going to Rome. You are not beating me right here.” So, Paul points out his citizenship, which is a powerful, powerful thing.

Some of you guys might have known a guy who used to work at Monte Alban, named Paco. Does anybody remember him? I remember when Paco went through getting his citizenship and it was years long. He would have to go back to Mexico and I remember one time when it was for the better part of a year. It was a rigorous process for him to get his citizenship. The reason Joe and Kendra are having to go back to England—we are going to be praying over them at the end of the service—is because citizenship stuff is tricky. We kind of get it but it was different in the Roman Empire. There were certain rights that were given to citizens.

Now, watch this—watch what Paul says to this guy.

“Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?”

In other words, “I haven’t had a legal, Roman trial.”

When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune…

That was his boss, the general.

… and said to him, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.” 27 So the tribune came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.” 28 The tribune answered, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum.” Paul said, “But I am a citizen by birth.”

What does that mean? Well, in this scene, the tribune is basically treating Paul as a social equal, and what he is saying is, “You were born with citizenship,” and that far East, to be born with citizenship meant you were born into a socially elite family. So, this was some serious status. This guy bought his citizenship and here’s how he probably got that. He was conscripted into the army, or he joined the army, or he was a slave that was then put into the army, and he worked his way up through the ranks by fighting in wars and going to battle, and he probably lost blood for Rome, and then got enough rank that he had enough money that he could pay the higher-ups for citizenship. That’s how he got citizenship. So, he’s literally like a second-class citizen to Paul but he’s the guy in charge right now. But Paul’s Roman citizenship gave him a lot of rights and protection.

So, let me give you two big picture considerations before we move on to chapter 23. The first one is that Paul was not afraid of being flogged. Paul’s not turning around going, “Please don’t beat me.” It’s not like that. That’s not what’s happening here. We know that Paul, when he goes through his resume of all the beatings he’s taken that he’s been stoned, he’s been flogged, he’s been beaten with rods, he’s been beaten with whips, he’s had mob justice, and it’s a miracle the dude is alive. By the end of his life—you might remember this—he says in the book of Galatians, “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Remember when he said that from when we studied that? “I bear in my body.” He had scars to show his beatings. He had a hard time walking.

Many of us have a friend named Dustin Chapel. Dustin is in his mid-forties but he can hardly stand up. He has to walk with help because he was in several combat tours and was injured. He was blown up and his knees are shot, his back is shot, and he moves like he’s about thirty years older than he actually is. That’s how Paul was.

But Paul was not afraid of being flogged. That’s not what this is about. Number two is that Paul was taking this opportunity to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and call people to repentance. Now, watch this. In Luke 12:11-12, this is Jesus speaking, and He said,

And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, 12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.

The word for ‘defend’ in Luke 12:11, when Jesus says, “Don’t be anxious about how to defend yourself,”—the word for ‘defend’ suggests that Paul is not giving a rebuttal of each of the charges or accusations against him but rather he is doing something much more specific and elaborate. What he’s doing is he is using this opportunity of defense to proclaim the Gospel. Let me see if I can illustrate this. Paul has been given an opportunity to defend himself and just as Jesus had prophesied, the words that come out of Paul’s mouth are a Gospel proclamation, not a “don’t-punish-me-here’s-why-I’m-innocent” defense. He doesn’t do that; he doesn’t use the opportunity to prove his innocence. He uses the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. That’s what the idea of his defense means. Jesus had said that is what was going to happen. Jesus had suggested this tactic. In Luke 21:12-15, Jesus records this,

But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. 13 This will be your opportunity to bear witness.

That word “bear witness” is the same thing. Defend and bear witness are the same idea—to proclaim the Gospel. So, He’s saying, “When you get arrested, tortured, beaten, and put in front of a crowd of people, put in front of a Roman tribunal, put in front of a Jewish angry mob, don’t worry. I’m going to use you in that moment to proclaim the Gospel.” That’s amazing. Not, “I’m going to use you in that moment to not let you get hurt, to not let you die, to not let you go to prison, to make sure you don’t get bloody, to make sure it doesn’t hurt,” no, but, “What I’m going to do is I’m going to embolden you with the message of the Gospel.” Paul says in Romans 1,

“I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the power of God unto salvation.”

The power of the Gospel emboldens people in the moment of the proclamation of the Gospel. So, proclaiming the Gospel to a persecuted believer is not only the boldest thing they can do but as they do it, it emboldens them because Jesus said it would. It’s Jesus’ words coming out of them. Paul is bold in this moment.

Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, 15 for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

Listen to this—He says, “In that moment I will give you a word that your enemies and your adversaries cannot withstand and cannot contradict.” Do you know what He’s saying? In that moment, the Gospel is not on trial. The people are on trial by the Gospel. The Gospel is never on trial, Red Oak. The Gospel is never in need of vindication. The Gospel is never in need of defense because it is the power of God and God asks no man’s permission for anything. He doesn’t negotiate with humans. He simply moves, and acts, and lives, and exists, and it’s perfection, and it’s holiness, and it’s immutability, and He’s unchanging, and He’s unattainable, and He cannot be reached, or approached, or spoken to apart from the grace that He gives us to be able to do that. The Gospel is powerful.

So, these people put Paul up there just like they did Jesus and they think that man is on trial. But that man is not on trial. The Gospel is not on trial. We are never judging the Gospel. The Gospel is always judging humanity. That’s what’s happening. Can the Gospel really be put on trial in a court of human opinion? Derek Thomas points out that in reality the Gospel is trying those who are its accusers. This is important for us in modern day. I heard a commentator recently—a podcast-type guy or news guy—I don’t remember who it was. Yeah, I do, but I’m not going to say who because I don’t want to give him that credibility. He was being cynical, “Christianity—you believe a God died and came back to life three days later?” and I was thinking, “You believe that everything came from nothing but there was some alien life force….” That’s what atheism, Darwinian atheism, teaches; that somewhere stuff started and it must have been an alien deal. Are you guys tracking with me? Is that insanity? “We don’t believe in the resurrection but we believe that deistic, atheistic aliens started a big bang.” Do you see what I’m saying? If someone is assaulting the Gospel, here’s what they have to do—they have to defend their own belief system, ultimately. The Gospel doesn’t have to be defended but every other belief system has to be defended and none of them hold water. So, what you have is these accusers who are really, really on the defensive because that’s what happens when you assault the Gospel; you go on the defensive because you can’t assault the Gospel.

Remember in Little Rascals? The bully dude was holding the little guy who had the boxing gloves like this by the top of his head and the little guy was punching. You know what I’m saying? He was holding his head and he was swinging at the air like this. That’s somebody assaulting the Gospel. God is holding them and they’re swinging. They are just beating the air.

Verse 29, let’s keep going.

So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

That dude is like, “Man, I’m in hot water. I just bound this Roman citizen up.” So, we get down to verse 30,

But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.

So, Paul had been bound all night. That’s kind of crazy to think about. So, he brings him down and Paul says, in 30:1,

“Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.”

So, a couple of thoughts on those verses. Paul has lived his life above reproach and in clear conscience. I think it’s important that, as Christians, you are never going to please people and you are never going to make everybody happy, but we should strive to live our lives in what we call ‘above reproach.’ Be a person of honesty. Be a person of integrity. Be a person who if you say you are going to follow Christ then legit follow Christ. Genuinely live out your faith because people are going to watch and they are going to demand, even if they don’t articulate that and demand it verbally, people are expecting that if you say you are a Christian that you’re a Christian. You know? So you should live it out. Paul’s life had lived above reproach. That doesn’t mean that he was perfect but it meant that there was a consistency and an integrity with his life. We should strive for that. He’s saying that both before, when he was a Jew, and now, as a Christian, that he had always sought with all of his might to live as a man of God. He had a clear conscience on that even though he wasn’t perfect. Paul told the Corinthians believers that he had a clear conscience but that didn’t mean he was all good. He needed the Lord every single day. We need to remember that Christian character always matters. This is especially true when we are living out our faith or defending it. Everybody in here has probably had a conversation with somebody when you are trying to share the Gospel and they say, “Yeah, but the Church is full of hypocrites." Yeah, they’re right, the Church is full of hypocrites. The Church is full of regenerate sinners. We were dead in our sin, right? So, it’s not really hard to find some material on each of us, right? You don’t have to dig really deep. Talk to your spouse who could probably give some material. Nobody is going to get it all the way right in this life. Nobody is perfect and it’s easy to find imperfection. It’s so easy to find imperfection. That’s why it’s so important in the body of Christ that we extend grace to each other and show kindness. We extend grace to one another within the family, within the Church, within your work environment, and within your school environment. We show grace, we extend grace, we’re kind to one another, we’re tenderhearted, we are quick to forgive, not quick to judge, and those are important things, but ultimately each one of us takes responsibility for our own life and says, “I’m going to try to live above reproach.” Have you ever heard that phrase? Above reproach. I’m going to live in such a way that I can’t be accused.

So, we get down to verses 2-5. Paul had this weird interaction with the tribune and now he’s going to have this weird interaction with Ananias so I’ll try to shed some light on it.

And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

Paul had said, “Hey, man, I’ve lived above reproach,” and the high priest was like, “Punch him,” and they hit Paul on the mouth.

Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!”

That’s a phrase that comes from the book of Ezekiel. It’s a pretty harsh accusation.

“Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?”

It’s contrary to the Law because if you go back and study Levitical law there was a proper proceeding for punching somebody in the face in a court of law and they just broke it. They broke protocol.

Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God's high priest?” 5 And Paul said, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’”

What is going on there? The dude is like, “Hit him!” and the guy punches him and yells out, “That’s the high priest you’re yelling at!” and Paul’s like, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.” So, we need some clarity here. I did a ton of research on this. First, I’ve got questions that I didn’t get answered. Why in the world did this dude have Paul face-punched? Have you ever been punched in the face? Whoo! Shane Shook punched me in the face in fourth grade. It was the first time I ever got hit in the face and it made me so mad and so sad at the same time. That hurt so bad. But getting hit in the face is not fun. Paul reacted with intensity and then he apologized for it.

So, here are some possibilities for his response. Number one, getting punched in the face makes you momentarily, insanely irate. Check. Paul acted in a brief, reactionary rage and was immediately sorry for it. Been there, done that. Number two—these are just all maybes and I’ll give you what I think is going on but it’s a loose interpretation—Paul genuinely didn’t know that he was speaking to the high priest and he wouldn’t have spoken to him that way if he had known. This could be because Paul had bad eyesight or because he had been gone from Jerusalem for so many years that by the time he came back he didn’t recognize the guy. Maybe the guy was in street clothes and not in his high priestly garments. One idea would be that he misidentified the guy.

Number three, Paul could have been using sarcasm or irony. He knew it but he was talking trash or talking noise to the guy. “Oh, my bad. You’re the high priest.” That’s one theory and then the fourth one is that Paul simply crossed the line. He just got in the flesh, which kind of goes back to the first one. He was just irate. He crossed a line. It’s a great teaching point for us and I really, loosely think that what happened is that Paul, in a rage, lashed out. He was in the flesh. He wasn’t in the spirit. The Scripture says you can be angry and not sin and that there is such a thing as righteous indignation. It seems to me, since we know that Paul loved the Law, that probably what happened is that Paul lashed out against this man. Paul had a high regard for the priesthood because he had grown up in that. I think that he lashed out in the flesh and then he immediately repented and apologized. I think that’s what happened, which is literally how it reads in the text. Exodus 22:28 says,

You shall not revile God nor curse a ruler of your people.

And the Scripture supports this in other places. Paul says to not speak out against the emperor, and pray for your kings, and honor people, and have respect for the emperor, so I think that what we are seeing is just a glimpse into Paul’s emotion and humanity. Jesus taught us to speak softly and kindly to our persecutors. So, it’s this really intense scene. We get to verse 6,

Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” 7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. 9 Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, “We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?”

Okay, so this is really interesting because what Paul has done here is pretty brilliant. Here’s the way it works; the Sanhedrin was a group of people that consisted partly of the Sadducees and partly of the Pharisees. Both of them were high ranks of the Jewish religion. The Pharisees were conservative and lined up with the Old Testament teachings, so they believed in spirits, demons, angels, and resurrection from the dead. The Sadducees didn’t believe those things. They did not believe in resurrection, they did not believe in angels, and they did not believe in demons, but they all had this common enemy, called Jesus, so they got along really well. A common enemy will bind enemies together. Right? We were buddies with Stalin and the Soviets during WWII but that went south really quick when we no longer had the Nazis to fight. So, if you have a common enemy you might link up and be buddies. You might also remember that Pilate and Herod became BFFs after the night of Jesus’ trial. Prior to that they hated each other. Jesus unifies people one way or another. He unifies people against the Gospel or He unifies people for the Gospel. So, the Pharisees and Sadducees had this unifying effort to assault the Gospel faith of Christianity. So, Paul is brilliant. He’s a Pharisee, so watch what he does.

Now when Paul perceived…

It’s telling us that he’s paying attention. He’s using discernment. He’s looking around and he’s got his wits about him. He’s thinking, “Are these Pharisees or Sadducees? Ha, ha, ha! I’ve got an idea.”

…He cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee”….

He’s like, “I’m with y’all. I’m a Pharisee. That’s my background and education. That’s my upbringing.”

“It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.”

Now, what Paul has been preaching is not general resurrection. He’s been preaching the resurrection of Jesus. That’s the crux, the hub, of the Gospel. But what he does now is he says to the Pharisees, “I’m just talking about resurrection. We believe in resurrection.” So, the Pharisees and the Sadducees start fighting with each other. They start going at it. It’s brilliant. The entire Christian faith and Gospel rest on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the central message of the Gospel. So, things get really crazy. They start yelling. To the point, did you see what the Pharisees yelled right there in verse 9?

“We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?”

Now, they’re saying, “We think maybe this is a man of God.” It’s a crazy scene. The Roman tribunal is going to beat him, flog him, and the other dude is like, “He’s a citizen,” and Paul is like, “Yeah, I’m a citizen…and I’m a Pharisee.” So the Sadducees are like, “Kill him,” and the other crowd is like, “No, no, he believes in the resurrection like we do.” It’s just total, sheer chaos—and what is Paul doing in the middle of it? Preaching the Gospel. He’s just proclaiming the Gospel.

You’re not going to fix the world’s problems, Red Oak. We’re not going to make political parties get along. We’re not going to be able to bring reconciliation to broken families. We cannot play peacemaker all the time but we can always bring the message of hope that comes with the Gospel. He uses the word “hope” right there. So, the Gospel is what Paul is doing; he’s just proclaiming the Gospel.

Now, watch how spun out they get. Verse 10,

And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.

So, they go get Paul and bring him back. Now, watch this. We are driving now to the main point of the sermon. Right here, we’re going to land the plane. The main point and application come in verse 11.

The following night the Lord stood by him….

This is a very powerful scene. This is not Paul having a dream or Paul having a thought and the Lord comforted him in soul and spirit. The Lord stood by him and spoke to him…

… and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”

The Lord stood by him. The Lord encourages Paul but he does a couple of other things here. He encourages him but He also reminds him of his task and his calling.

So, let me give you four points of encouragement that we can take from this final verse that will help us in our application.

Number one, in understanding that the Lord is for us, and He’s speaking for us, and He’s calling us to courage, it is important to know this—that the Lord knows us. The Lord knows Paul. He knows his fears, He knows his anxieties. We saw a few weeks ago how God came to Paul in Acts 18 when he was in Corinth and He ministered to him and said, “Don’t be afraid.” God is speaking to Paul. But we see a boldness in Paul here that waned at one point in his ministry. Now, he is becoming bolder, and bolder, and bolder, but the Lord is reminding him, “Hey, I know you.” It’s important for us to understand that God knows us—that God is never taken off-guard by a thought that you have or a sin that you commit. God never gets spun out by the depravity of your own thinking or your brokenness. God loves you but He’s not going to leave you unchanged.

People tend to spin in one of two directions. That is judgment and condemnation, or hellfire and brimstone might be what you’ve heard that called, where it’s all about God’s judgment, judgment, judgment; or people over here are like, “God loves you and He loves you just the way you are. He’s going to leave you just like you are. He accepts you just the way you are.” No, He doesn’t. God takes what is dead and brings it to life and then He conforms it to His image, and He does all of that through the work of grace in our lives and He knows us. He knows you. He knows your fear, He knows your joy, He knows what motivates you, He knows what excites you, and He knows what brings dread. He knows us. So, God knows us—that’s an important doctrine to understand.

Number two, the Lord is with us. God is constantly reassuring Paul that He is there. God is physically, presently there with him. The Spirit of God is there with Paul in this moment. Hebrews 13:5 says that Jesus is never going to leave us and He’s never going to forsake us. That’s very important.

Number three, the third encouragement, is that the Lord doesn’t not only know Paul, and He’s not only there, but the Lord is for Paul. The Lord is for us. The Scripture says that God is for us, so who can stand against us. The Lord is for us. So, the Lord supports Paul in two ways here—this is important. In showing Paul that He is for him there are two really important things. First, He exhorts Paul. “Have courage.” This is like a dad speaking to his son.

I talked to a dad this week whose son, Hayden, is about five years old. He is getting into rodeo and they call it mutton busting. They get on these little sheep and ride around until they fall off. They have to stay on for six seconds. You know, sheep are not super violent. On *Animal Planet* there is not an episode where the predatory sheep are stalking the lion who thought he was the king of the beast. What do you do with sheep? You eat them and you wear them—end of story. That’s what they bring to the table. So, this dad was telling me the story about how they were at the rodeo, and you know how little boys are; the one little boy walks up and says, “Which one did you draw?” The sheep have numbers and at a rodeo you get drawn which bull, or horse, or whatever you’re going to ride. The boy says, “Oh, you got that one? That one is rough. That one is ranked. He’s a bad one.” The dad is like, “I’m sure he is.” But it spun the kid out and he was like, “I don’t want to ride.” He was down there in the chutes, in the gates, where they pull the gate open and you ride out. But the dad said, “I know it’s scary but you’re going to be fine. You’re a cowboy.” He was giving him that talk to bolster his confidence but the boy said, “I don’t want to.” So, the dad said, “Okay, but you have to take off your hat, take off your chaps, take off your spurs, and go sit in the bleachers and watch.” Guess what? That boy is riding sheep today.

So, there are times when where God is going to say is, “Have courage. This is what I’ve called you to.” Of course it’s hard. Of course it’s rough. Of course you have bad days. We live in a fallen world but don’t worry about it. We are going to be in Heaven one day with Jesus forever, eating fried chicken, and singing. I don’t know what it’s going to be like but we aren’t going to be crying. Nobody is going to be hooked on pills. Nobody’s shooting up. No babies are being molested. Nobody’s getting thrown in jail. They don’t need jail, or police, or prison in Heaven. Why? Because it is going to be glorious and the thing you’re going to notice that’s so different from here is that there is no sin or temptation. There ain’t no persecution there. So God is like, “Take courage and keep your eye on the prize. Stay focused.” Later, Paul would write to the Philippians, “I’ve fixed my eyes on the prize, which is the high calling in Christ Jesus.” So, the first part of the Lord telling Paul that He’s for him is that He exhorts him to have courage.

The second thing is that He commends him. This is beautiful. God commends him, “You did it! You did it, Paul!” Look right here in verse 11,

“Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem,…”

That’s past tense. God is like, “You did it, man! You stood in the gap, and you opened your mouth, and you proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the boldness that I gave you. You did it and I’m proud of you.” That’s invigorating to a person. That emboldens Paul. At this point, Paul’s boldness is coming on in a stronger way that his weakness has ever come. He’s ready to do whatever it takes.

Then, not only does God commend him and give him this encouragement, but the fourth part of the encouragement is that He tells him He is not finished with him. “I’m sending you to Rome. I have work for you to do. We’re not done. We’re not through.” That’s for us—if you’re breathing and you’ve got a pulse, God’s got work for you to do. Christians who are not at work go downhill fast. They fall fast. They get discouraged fast. They get swept away by sin and temptation fast. The thing is, if you will fix your eyes on Jesus and serve and love other people, care about other people, do the work of the Gospel, then God will give you strength and encouragement and keep you going. He will keep you on task. So, the Lord isn’t finished with Paul at this point. He gives him a promise in a vision. But here’s the thing—He’s not finished with us. That’s why He gave us His Word and His Spirit. He said, “I’m leaving and I’m going to leave the Helper with you.” God’s Spirit is promised to be in us. And the way the Bible paints the picture of the Holy Spirit is kind of like a big sail on a sailboat; the wind that is pushing into that sail and driving that boat along, that’s what the Holy Spirit does in my life. He drives me through His Word and through the Holy Spirit. God is not finished with me.

The conclusion is this. Jesus was with Paul when he testified in all of his trials. This is the second trial scene of five, before counsels, and judges, and kings, and God will be with us when we testify the Gospel of Jesus anytime. The question is, are you testifying to the Gospel of Jesus? If you call yourself a Christian, are you testifying to the Gospel of Jesus? Are you doing it? Because when you do you will find boldness, confidence, security, you will overcome fear, you will overcome anxiety. The proclamation of the Gospel—it will blow your mind what that will do in your life to bring these truths to fruition and reality in your own life. So, let’s be bold to do simply what God’s commanded and called us to do. Have the boldness of Jesus and the boldness of Paul. In Proverbs 28 there’s a verse that says that the righteous are as bold as a lion. That’s a good verse.

So, if you’re here tonight and you don’t know Jesus, Jesus wants to have a relationship with you and all you have to do is trust Him. It ain’t about whether you said enough prayers or if a priest sprinkled water on your noggin when you were a little kid. That don’t get you saved. That don’t get you to Heaven. It is through the preached Gospel, received through confession and repentance. There are going to be a lot of church members who will say, “Lord, Lord, let us into your kingdom,” and He’s going to say, “I don’t know you.” “We went to church,” “Yeah, but you don’t have a relationship with me.” It’s through faith in Jesus and confession of His lordship, repentance, and a turning from my sin to Jesus that brings salvation. That’s what’s offered to us tonight, if you don’t know the Lord. If you do, let’s be bold to proclaim the Gospel this week.

I’ll pray.

Lord, thank you for your Word and thank you for bringing clarity to us when we open it daily and read it and conviction to us when we surrender to it. I pray that tonight that you would help us to respond to the Word of God in whatever way you would have us to respond. I pray that we would be faithful and obedient. As we go into the workplace this week, I pray that we would be like Paul and that we would have confidence in obedience, trusting that if we obey you that good things come and the Gospel flourishes. My life will be sustained by your Spirit and your Word and I will make an impact. Help us to love each other well and love this community well and to do that until you call us home or come back and get us. I thank you and praise you for all that you’re going to do through this church. In Jesus’ name.