Acts: We Are Not Alone
Acts 22:30-23:11

As we return to our journey through Acts, remember that Paul has been arrested in the city of Jerusalem. Last week he was nearly scourged with whips at the orders of the Roman Tribune until he mentioned his Roman citizenship. Claudius Lysias, the Tribune, reacts with fear and respect when he learns that Paul is a Roman citizen, though Paul remains in custody for now. Let’s pick up the story in Acts 22:30, and we’ll read through Acts 23:11.

Before we jump into the text, let’s ask an obvious question: why has Paul been arrested? Did he commit a crime? No. Did he somehow challenge the Roman rule? No. So why is Paul in custody? The simple answer is that he has caused a riot in the streets of Jerusalem by simply being in the city! His reputation as one that disrespected the Jewish law and customs caused such a riot that the mob of angry Jews almost beat him to death. Riots were illegal according to Roman law, so Paul is arrested as the source of the rioting…even though he was in no way leading a riot. That’s clear right? Clear as mud.

Now, the Tribune, who is the Roman officer responsible for keeping the peace in the streets, is convinced that Paul must have done something terribly wrong for this mob of men to react so violently. He wanted to torture the “truth” out of Paul by having him scourged…the ancient tactic of interrogation…but that was not an option because Paul was a Roman citizen. Paul’s citizenship protected him from being bound or beaten until he had a fair trial. Still, the Tribune’s job is to get to the source of the rioting, so he decides to call an informal hearing by inviting the Sanhedrin to come and have an interview with Paul. We read in vs. 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.”

Now…remember: Paul has been beaten badly. He just spent the night in jail. So imagine his pathetic state when he is placed before the 71 members of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Remember also that Paul once hung out with a lot of these guys as highly regarded Pharisee. It’s been many years since Paul was last in Jerusalem, which probably explains what Paul does next. Look at vs. 1, “And looking intently at the council…” Once again, it doesn’t take a lot of imagination to picture this scene. Paul looks intently at the council…he looks at their faces, remembering how he went to school with some of these men. He remembers how many of these high-ranking officials of the Jewish people plotted to kill Jesus and took great pride in having Him executed. Any normal Jewish man would have been shaking in his shoes…but not Paul. These men are not his betters…he knows them all too well. So Paul doesn’t back down. He begins by declaring his innocence before God. Let’s read vs. 1, “And looking intently at the council, Paul said, ‘Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.”
Paul says in no uncertain terms, “With God as my witness, I have nothing to hide. I have walked in the light. I am not here to apologize or recant anything that I’ve said.” This statement is similar to what Paul said to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:26, “I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink back from declaring the whole counsel of God.”

You know who Paul sounds like here in vs. 1? He sounds a bit like Jesus when he was questioned by the council in John 18. Turn to John 18 and read with me, beginning with vs. 19, “The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered him, “I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret…Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I have said. When he had said these things, one of the officers struck Jesus with his hand, saying, ‘Is that how you answer the high priest?’”

Remember that scene? Now, watch what happens to Paul when he makes a similar statement to the council, beginning with vs. 2, “And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.”

The acorn doesn’t fall far from the tree, right? Paul is looking more like Jesus all the time. He’s talking like Jesus, and he’s getting treated like Jesus. But alas, Paul is not Jesus. He’s still Paul…he’s still a fallen guy like the rest of us, which is why he flat out loses his temper when he is slapped for no reason. Check out how Paul responds in vs. 3, “Then Paul said to him, ‘God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?’ Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God’s high priest?” 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.’”

This scene is frustrating and awkward. Let me unpack just a few things for better historical understanding.

First of all, there’s a new sheriff in town since Paul was last in Jerusalem. Years ago when Paul resided in Jerusalem, the high priest was a man named Caiaphas, a name we all recognize from the Gospels. However, in the years since Paul departed Jerusalem, Caiaphas was benched by Rome and a new high priest was appointed—a man named Ananias ben Nebedeus. According to the first century Jewish historian Josephus, Ananias served as high priest from AD 47-52. History remembers Ananias as “a violent, haughty, gluttonous, and rapacious man, and yet looked up to by the Jews.” Now, don’t get this man Ananias confused with Annas, the former high priest who was also the father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest. That Annas is mentioned on multiple occasions in the gospels, but that’s not who now serves as the high priest here in Acts. This is Ananias, that man was Annas. And don’t confuse the High Priest Ananias with the...
wonderful Christian man named Ananias who was a citizen of Damascus and the friend who helped restore Paul’s sight after his encounter with Jesus on the road outside of Damascus. That’s a different Ananias. Got it? That’s all clear now, right? Clear as mud.

Moving on, we must ask the question, “How did Paul not recognize Annias as the High Priest?” Clearly, on most occasions, the High Priest was easily recognized by his priestly robe and ornaments. Is Paul lying in an effort to get out of trouble? Doubtful. If Paul is being literal and truthful, I think it’s more likely that the High Priest was either 1) not dressed for the occasion; 2) hidden from Paul’s questionable eyesight; or 3) the trial was early in the morning and Paul didn’t recognize Ananias since he was the new guy.

Whatever the case, had Paul known it was the High Priest who gave the order for him to be struck, we’re left with the impression that Paul would have bit his lip and not directly challenged Ananias, since a good, law-abiding Jew knows better than to “speak evil of a ruler of God’s people” as is written in Exodus 22:28.

Now Paul may have been wrong to lash out at the High Priest, but what he said was accurate. The council broke God’s law by striking Paul. Leviticus 19:15 states, “You shall do no injustice in the court.” According to Rabbinic Law, “He who strikes the cheek of one Israelite, strikes as it were the glory of God.” This particular High Priest was notoriously corrupt, so it’s possible that Paul is saying, “I don’t even recognize you as the High Priest. You are a white-washed wall, a hypocrite of the highest order.” What is a white-washed wall? Remember that the Jews white-washed the tombs so that people would be sure to stay clear less they become unclean by coming into contact with the defiled area, so Paul is definitely insulting Ananias, insinuating that Ananias looks the part, but he is actually as rotten as they get. Now who else used that particular insult to make a point about religious hypocrisy? Jesus did. Look at Matthew 23:27-28, “27 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” So…Paul even curses like Jesus! That is true sanctification.

Now, this interview with the Council is clearly going nowhere. In one minute Paul has already insulted the High Priest, been slapped, and there’s no indication that things are going to get better any time soon. Paul’s not an idiot. He is a well-trained Pharisee, and as he looks around the room, he sees an opportunity to divide and conquer those who are now judging him. Look at vss. 6-7, “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.’ And when he had said this, a dissention arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.”

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Imagine if you all were interviewing me about something I said, and I got to the point of thinking that this interview is not going very well. Like Paul, all I would have to do is say, “Brothers, I live in Kansas, and these Missouri Tigers are accusing me of believing that the Jayhawks are the best basketball team in the nation!” In a matter of minutes this place would be torn apart by those arguing about college basketball bragging rights, while I would no longer be on the hot seat. See how that works? What’s more, the Kansas people who were previously upset with me over some other issue would suddenly rally to my defense…not because they agree with me, but because they so vehemently disagree with everyone from Missouri. Can you see that that’s what is happening here in Acts 23? Paul just identified with the Jayhawks, and he set them fighting against the Tigers, which eventually leads the Jayhawks to take up Paul’s defense, although quite unwittingly.

By the way…I would never do such a thing. My son is going to K State, which means we are far more civil than those other schools. 😊 Moving on…

Look at Luke’s explanation for this chaos between the Sadducees and the Pharisees beginning with vs. 8, “For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.”

Paul understood where the battle lines were drawn between these two religious/political parties, and he quite intentionally picked a fight that he knew both sides could not resist. This would be like raising the subject of abortion in congress, or claiming your allegiance to Donald Trump at the Academy Awards. Predictably, chaos ensues. Let’s keep reading beginning with vs. 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?”

Notice the proclamation of innocence by those who were set in the place of judgment. Who else was proclaimed innocent? Jesus was. Remember Pilate’s proclamation in Luke 23:4, “Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, ‘I find no guilt in this man.’” Once again, the parallels between the trial of Jesus and the trial of Paul are striking.

Now note, the scribes of the Pharisees take up Paul’s defense because within their worldview and understanding of scripture, it is actually conceivable that Paul heard from an “angel” or a “spirit” on the road to Damascus. These Pharisees are not contending for the resurrection of Christ, though they are demonstrating that the Jewish scriptures allowed for the possibility that human beings might be spoken to either by “messengers of God”…angels; or, “spirits” of those humans who are no longer alive in the body, such as we might interpret Jesus’ encounter with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration in Luke 9. I suspect that the Pharisees like Nicodemus and others were some of the first Jewish converts for exactly that reason.
Now…if you’re counting, this is the third riot that forms around the Apostle Paul in two days! Look at vs. 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.”

What a mess. Now, imagine you are Paul. You are hurting from your beating yesterday. Your heart is racing because you almost got beaten up again just now. You barely escaped getting flogged yesterday, but once again you are in jail, and who knows how long you will rot away in this place of confinement and humiliation? Things have not gone according to plan.

I think Paul is about as deflated as he has ever been at this moment. Remember, Paul had been dreaming about bringing the gospel to Jerusalem…to his people…for years. Paul had seen entire regions come to the faith…he had seen God perform incredible signs and wonders among the Gentiles…he clearly had high hopes for his reunion tour in Jerusalem. But try as he might, his efforts have been rejected by all…even those who called themselves Jewish Christians. At this point, I suspect Paul is feeling totally, utterly alone and defeated.

But he is not alone. Look at vs. 11, “The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”

Just at the moment when Paul was at the end of his rope, when he was ready to give up the fight…the Lord enters into the prison cell, wrapped in brilliant light, and Paul hears three things: 1) He is not alone…Jesus is in the prison cell with him; 2) He is to be courageous…all is not lost; and 3) He is to double-down on his call to be a witness…there is still work to be done.

I believe this was a major turning point in Paul’s life. What felt like a colossal failure was simply part of God’s plan. And what was God’s plan? That Paul would testify to the facts about Jesus.

Notice: it was not God’s plan for Paul to be liked. It was not God’s plan that all of Jerusalem would somehow magically agree with Paul and become tithing members of the local church. It was not God’s plan for Paul to feel great about his performance and the effectiveness of his ministry. The Lord called his servant Paul to testify to the facts about Jesus in Jerusalem, and in Rome: the capital city of the Jewish world, and the capital city of the Gentile world. I think following this encounter with Jesus in the prison cell, Paul said to himself, “Forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lie ahead, I will press on toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

From this moment on, Paul is focused, unshakeable, and at peace with his fate. I think we all need a visit from Jesus from time to time, amen?
So here’s a few takeaways as you prepare to enter back into your life this week.

1) Please remember that Jesus is with you. Most of us go about our lives everyday giving very little thought to Jesus. If we do think of Him, we often think of Him as the great moral Scorekeeper in the sky. Rarely do we carry with us the perspective that Jesus is with us...as in the car with us, as in sitting in church right next to us, as in sitting at the table tonight at dinner or on the couch beside us as we watch TV. What would happen if we all began to live our lives as though Jesus was actually WITH us? How would that change your life? I suspect that if you knew Jesus was with you...next to you...beside you...then you might actually TALK to Him a bit more frequently, right? You might ask Him a few more questions...maybe ask for his opinion on what you should do, or even ask Him to lend you hand from time to time. At the minimum, I suspect you would rest a whole lot easier knowing He is there. But historically, even the greatest of disciples overlook the fact that Jesus is with them. One of the greatest examples of this forgetfulness was when the disciples were in the boat, crossing the Sea of Galilee, and a huge storm arose as recorded in Matthew14. Their boat was being tossed about to and fro, they felt like they were in going to go under at any minute...and then along comes Jesus, walking on the water right next to their boat, and He says the same thing that he says to Paul, “Take heart...Courage! I’m here. Don’t be afraid.” Another time when the disciples are worried about their ship going down, Jesus asks, “Why are you afraid?” The question implies the obvious conclusion: if Jesus is in the boat, we don’t need to be afraid. If Jesus is in our prison cell, we can have courage. If Jesus is beside us, that’s enough...we’re going to be OK, no matter how many people hate us, no matter how much injustice comes our way, no matter how bad we blew it...Take Heart...Jesus is with you. Church...right down a reminder in your calendar...on each and every day with these words: Take Heart, Jesus is with you! And then live accordingly.

2) Be ready to testify to the facts about Jesus. Now...what do I mean by that? Two things: 1) Testify to the historical/biblical facts about Jesus. That means we need to study our Bible, pay attention in church, and devote ourselves to knowing and understanding the Gospel so that we will be prepared to testify to the FACTS...not our opinions...the FACTS about Jesus. FACT: Jesus lived. FACT: Jesus was brilliant. FACT: Jesus is the most influential human being who has ever lived, bar none. FACT: Jesus was falsely accused, suffered scorn and shame, and died an excruciating death on a Roman cross, though He did nothing wrong. FACT: Jesus understood that He came to die for people who did things wrong...like all of us...so that we might be forgiven through His atoning sacrifice to God. FACT: Jesus didn’t stay dead...he arose on the third day and conquered death as attested to by multiple witnesses in the New Testament. FACT: Jesus brings hope, forgiveness, and life-transformation for all who repent and place their faith in Him. Those are all facts about Jesus. But the second set of facts comes by way of your personal testimony. Be ready to testify to the FACTS about Jesus in regards to how He has changed your...
life; how He gives you hope; how He has delivered you from the tyranny of your sin; how He has forgiven you and empowered you to forgive others. Here’s your assignment: Go home today and right down the FACTS that you know about Jesus…both from the Bible, and from your own life. Write them down…read them over and over again, and be prepared to give testimony wherever God leads you. That’s a big part of what it means to be a disciple.

This week I was having lunch with my good buddy Mike Bickley from Olathe Bible Church. We had a nice young, 20 something waitress who recognized the material we were working on and asked which of us was a pastor? Well…you know we couldn’t resist that invitation! So we shared a bit with her and then asked her about her faith. She went on to give us the textbook post-modern/millennial answer about “a higher power” that no one should claim to know anything about, but it really doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you aren’t hurting anyone. We continued to probe and learned more about her life. She quite willing shared that she had been raped, and that she wanted her rapist to burn in hell, if there is a hell. We didn’t have much time, she was very busy, so what did we do? We gave testimony about the facts concerning Jesus…because that’s what Christ-followers do. Did she immediately drop to her knees and accept Jesus? No, but we were faithful, and I know the Holy Spirit planted a seed in that young lady’s heart, because she felt loved, heard, and the name of Jesus was spoken over her. That’s how it works. It’s not rocket science, but it is the calling of every person who is saved in Christ…testify. Amen?

3) My last point is one I’ve made before, but it bears repeating: if we are disciples of Jesus, if we are students of Jesus, if we are followers of Jesus, our lives should look more and more like His life with every passing year, just as we observed in the life and story of the Apostle Paul. As Dallas Willard often wrote, “Our lives should take on the nature of Jesus in the way that Jesus would live in our shoes if he were us…working our jobs, residing in our homes, parenting our children, etc.” This is mission critical. I came across some research this past week as to the four major thresholds for un-churched millennials to accept Christianity. Do you know what the first and most significant obstacle is for most unbelieving young people in our country? Here it is: they are not personally acquainted with one authentic Jesus-follower. Those “Christians” they have been exposed to are “white-washed walls”…their hypocrisy is obvious and disillusioning, so they really don’t know what an actual “disciple of Jesus” looks like…they have no actual disciple of Jesus to talk to, to learn from, to understand the Gospel.

My hope for our church is that wherever we are, in whatever context our Colonial members are found, therein will be an authentic, devoted follower of Jesus who will show the world what Jesus looks like through their testimonies and their actions. I think that’s exactly what Jesus had in mind when he told his disciples, “Now you are the light of the world.” Let’s pray.

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