**Paul’s Trial Before the Jewish Council**

(Acts 23:1-11)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

After losing a trial in court, a man went to a bar one evening to drown his sorrows. He sat down and cried out, “All lawyers are *scumbags.”* The man sitting next to him said, “Hey! I take issue with that!” The man asked, “Why? Are you a lawyer?” He replied, “No. I’m a scumbag!”

Then in *another* trial, the prosecuting attorney asked the defendant, “Did you kill that man?” He responded, “No, I didn’t.” The prosecutor then asked, “Do you know what the penalty is for lying under oath?” He answered, “Yes, I do. And it’s a *whole* lot less than the penalty for murder!”

Speaking of trials, here in our text in Acts 23, the Apostle Paul is on trial before the Jewish council of elders, and he begins his defense in verse 1, where we read:

**“And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day” (Acts 23:1).**

Now to begin with, you know what your conscience is, right? It’s that thing in your head that *accuses* you if you don’t do what’s right, as Paul said when he talked about Gentiles and said,

**“...their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while *accusing* or else *excusing...”* (Romans 2:15).**

Your conscience reminds you of what you think is right, and then *excuses* you if you do it, and *accuses* you if you don’t. The problem with your conscience is: It can be misinformed, and what you think is *right* is actually *wrong.*

Your conscience is like a sundial. A sundial only gives the correct time if the light of the sun is shining on it. It will give the *wrong* time if the light of the *moon* is shining on it. And if you go out on a moonless night and shine a *flashlight* on it, you can make it *any time you want.* The men who flew those planes into the World Trade Center on 9/11 did so “in all good conscience,” because their religion misinformed them to believe that it was *right* to murder Christian Americans.

And *Paul’s* conscience told *him* it was right to murder Christians as well, so *he too* did it in all good conscience. Then, after he got saved,he began *preaching* Christianity in all good conscience, because now he knew that *that’s* what’s *really* right.

And the Jewish council here knew all that about Paul. And their leader took issue with what Paul said, as we see as we read on in our text:

**“And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth” (Acts 23:2).**

The high priest would have agreed that Paul had lived in all good conscience when he was killing the followers of Jesus Christ, because *he too* thought that Christ’s followers should be killed. But when Paul implied that he’d been *preaching* Christ in all good conscience, that’s what made the high priest command that he be whacked across the mouth.

But to smite Paul like that was against the law of Moses, and Paul called him on it, as we see in the next verse of our text passage:

**“Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?” (Acts 23:3).**

Paul said, as it were, “You’re supposed to be judging me according to the law of Moses, and the first thing you do in this kangaroo court is *break* the law of Moses!” He was thinking of what the law said in Deuteronomy 25:1,2, where Moses wrote:

**“If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them*....*it shall be, *if the wicked man be worthy to be beaten,* that the judge shall cause him to lie down, and to be beaten...”**

Judges weren’t supposed to beat a man before they determined if he was *worthy* to be beaten, and that required hearing what he had to say first. That explains what one of the Jewish leaders said about the Lord in John 7:50,51, where

**“Nicodemus saith...Doth our law judge any man, *before it hear him...?”***

The answer to that question according to Deuteronomy 25 was *no,* it *doesn’t!* But that’s what they were trying to do with the Lord there, and that’s what Ananias was doing here to Paul. That’s why Paul called him a “whited wall.” That was a Jewish figure of speech for a *hypocrite,* as we see when the Lord said,

**“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, *hypocrites!* for ye are like unto *whited sepulchres,* which indeed appear beautiful outward, *but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.* Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, *but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity”* (Matthew 23:27,28).**

In those days Jews would whitewash their tombs to honor their dead. But no matter how they whitewashed the *outside* of their sepulchers, they were still full of rotting flesh and putrid uncleanness *inside.* And no matter how pious the Pharisees acted on the outside, inwardly *they too* were filled with all iniquity, since the best of men are only men at best. And that made them *hypocrites.*

And in this case here in Acts 23, *the high priest* was being a hypocrite, because he was pretending to judge Paul according to the law, but he *broke* the law when he ordered him smitten. So Paul told Ananias that someday God would smite *him* for his hypocrisy.

But some of the council members didn’t take too kindly to Paul saying that, as we see in verse 4:

**“And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest?” (Acts 23:4).**

Now that word “revile” isn’t one we use much these days, but it means *to speak evil* of someone, as we see when the Lord said,

**“Blessed are ye, when men shall *revile* you...and shall say *all manner of evil* against you...” (Mathew 5:11).**

And speaking evil *of the high priest* was *also* against the law of Moses, as we see when Moses wrote:

**“Thou shalt not *revile the gods,* nor *curse the ruler of thy people”* (Exodus 22:28).**

That’s the verse those council members were referencing in verse 4.

Now “the gods” there were the *lesser* rulers of Israel. We know that because John 10:34,35 says,

**“Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, *Ye are gods?*...He called them gods, *unto whom the word of God came.”***

And the Word of God came *to the Jews* in the Old Testament. The Lord was quoting Psalm 82, where the psalmist wrote,

**“God...judgeth *among the gods.* How long will ye judge unjustly...I have said, *Ye are gods...*but ye shall die like men...” (Psalm 82:1,2,6,7).**

God called the Jewish *rulers* “gods” there. They were ruling *unjustly* in those days, so the psalmist told them that God was going to judge *them* for it, just as Paul told Ananias here. Paul was actually referencing that psalm when he promised the high priest that God would judge him.

But it’s important to notice that even though Israel’s rulers were judging unjustly in those days, God still called them gods. That should give you some idea of the respect that God wants us to give the rulers of *our* nation, even when they judge *us* unjustly.

Now if it seems weird to call a man a god, look what God told Moses in Exodus 7:1:

**“...the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made *thee* a god to *Pharaoh.”***

God made Moses a god to Pharaoh, and God makes our rulers gods to us. That explains what somebody got charged with in I Kings 21:10, where the man was told,

**“Thou didst blaspheme God *and* the king” (I Kings 21:10).**

If God wants kings to be considered gods, then *reviling* them by speaking *evil* of them is *blasphemy.*

And yet I hear Christians do it all the time! They argue that it’s *not* speaking evil of a ruler if what you say about him is *true.* But everything *Paul* said about the high priest was true! The high priest *was* a hypocrite! And God *will* smite him for it someday. But in the next verse of our text, Paul agreed that what he’d just said was speaking evil of his ruler:

**“Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people” (Acts 23:5).**

Paul is quoting that verse in Exodus 22 here, and saying, as it were, “I shouldn’t have spoken evil of the ruler of our people. What I said was true, but I shouldn’t have said it.” And he said he *wouldn’t* have said it had he *known* the man was his ruler. We know that’s true, because you never see Paul speaking evil of *Roman* rulers either, and some of them were *heinously* wicked.

So, when you see our leaders acting wickedly, even when they act wickedly *toward us,* just remember that someday God will judge among the gods, and in *that* day they’ll all get what’s coming to them. In the meantime, if *you* get arrested and beaten on false charges like Paul was here, it’s important to be as gracious and respectful as Paul said he wouldhave been had he known the man was Israel’s high priest.

But having said that, I should add that it’s okay to ask *questions* if you’re unjustly beaten. We know that because that’s what *the Lord* did when *He* was arrested on false charges and smitten as Paul was. In John 18:22,23, the apostle describes how

**“One of the officers which stood by *struck Jesus with the palm of his hand,* saying, *Answerest Thou the high priest so?* Jesus answered him, If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, *why smitest thou Me?”***

Now the Lord hadn’t *reviled* the high priest. Take the time to read that passage and you’ll see that all He did was answer the high priest’s question. But that officer smacked Him anyway.

It doesn’t say he hit Him on the mouth, but we know he tried to, because the prophet Micah *predicted* they’d hit Him when he wrote,

**“...they shall smite the Judge of Israel with a rod *upon the cheek.* But thou, Bethlehem...out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be *ruler in Israel;* whose goings forth have been from of old, *from everlasting”* (Micah 5:1,2).**

That’s a prediction of how that officer smote the Lord that day. I know John said that the officer struck the Lord with the palm of his hand, and Micah predicted he’d be smitten with a rod. But we know the officers who came to arrest the Lord were *carrying* rods, because Luke tells us how

**“Jesus said unto the...*captains of the temple...*which were come to Him, Be ye come out, as against a thief, with swords *and staves?”* (Luke 22:52).**

That word “staves” there is the plural form of the word *staff,* and a staff is a *rod.* That officer held that staff between his palm and his thumb and *aimed* to smack the Lord’s mouth for what he perceived to be His disrespect to the high priest, and ended up smiting Him on the cheek. But even after the Lord was unjustly smitten, He didn’t speak evil of the officer *or* the high priest! He just asked Him a question, as we saw there in John 18. So if you’re arrested and beaten, you can ask questions like the Lord did. That’s not being disrespectful. Just make sure you do it as respectfully as He did.

Now I personally think that the reason Paul didn’t *know* that the man was Israel’s ruler is that Paul had bad eyesight! If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have told the Galatians,

**“...if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, *and have given them to me”* (Galatians 4:15).**

So even if Ananias was wearing some kind of special clothing that *identified* him as the high priest, Paul wouldn’t have seen it.

But getting smitten before he was given a chance to testify made Paul realizethat this was a kangaroo court, and there was no way he was going to get a fair hearing. But he didn’t care about that! He hadn’t come to Jerusalem to get a fair hearing. He had come to preach *Christ* to those unsaved Jews. And he figured out how to *start* preaching Christ when he noticed something about the council, something he describes in verses 6:

**“But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question.**

**“And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided.**

**“For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.**

**“And there arose a great cry: and the scribes that were of the Pharisees' part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God” (Acts 23:6-9).**

Now before we talk about how Paul was starting up a gospel message here, we have to ask how he could say he was a Pharisee, because some Bible commentaries wonder if he was being truthful here. They know that Paul *used to be* a Pharisee, but he hadn’t been a *practicing* Pharisee for 25 years, and everyone on that council knew it. What he *meant* was that, when it came to the doctrine of the resurrection, he *stood* with the Pharisees *against* the Sadducees, because the Scriptures *teach* that God can raise the dead.

Of course, when he *said* that he sided with the Pharisees, that caused a “dissension” between the two groups, and the dictionary says the word dissension means *a violent discussion.* Some Bible commentaries say that Paul *instigated* that violent discussion to save himself from those unsaved Jews by getting them too busy fighting *themselves* to worry about killing *him.* But those commentators are forgetting that Paul didn’t *care* if he lived or died. When a prophet told him he’d be arrested if he went to Jerusalem, he said,

**“I am ready not to be bound only, *but also to die at Jerusalem* for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13).**

So Paul didn’t say he was a Pharisee to instigate a riot *to save himself.* He said it *to save the Pharisees,* by starting to preach a gospel message to them, because he knew they were *close* to being saved to begin with.

If you’re wondering why I’d say that, if we consider some of the things we read about the Pharisees in the four gospels, it seems clear that the Lord was making some headway with them when He was here ministering to them. For instance, Luke tells us about the time that

**“...a certain Pharisee *besought Him to dine with him...”* (Luke 11:37).**

As I’m sure I don’t have to tell you, you don’t invite a man to dinner if you think he’s a heretic.

Next, it’s sometimes overlooked that

**“There was a man *of the Pharisees,* named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews...” (John 3:1).**

And remember, Nicodemus was the guy who said they shouldn’t judge the Lord before they heard Him. He was obviously beginning to think well of the Lord after learning about the new birth in John 3. Plus, it says of Nicodemus in John 19:39,40:

**“Nicodemus...brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes...Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.”**

Would Nicodemus assist in making sure the Lord received an honorable burial if he thought He was a fraud?

Then there was the time that

**“...there came *certain of the Pharisees,* saying unto Him, *Get Thee out,* and depart hence: *for Herod will kill Thee”* (Luke 13:31).**

Some of the Pharisees *tried to save the Lord’s life,* which means at the very least they thought He was an innocent man who didn’t deserve to fall victim to Herod’s murderous intent.

So it seems clear that the Lord was making some headway with the Pharisees. And then something must have happened to cause some of the Pharisees to *believe* on Christ, because Acts 15:5 talks about

**“...certain of the sect of the Pharisees *which believed.”***

Something happened that made those Pharisees stop thinking that Jesus was just an innocent guy, and believe He was their Christ—something Paul talked to the Romans about when he wrote,

**“Jesus Christ our Lord...was...declared to be the Son of God...*by the resurrection from the dead”* (Romans 1:3,4).**

Now here you may be thinking: “How did *that* work? How did Christ’s resurrection declare that He was the Son of God?” The answer is that the Scriptures *predicted* that Israel’s Christ would rise from the dead. So when *Jesus of Nazareth* did, I think a *lot* of Pharisees must have believed on Christ because, for all their faults, they knew the Scriptures well.

Plus, did you know that in the Book of Acts *not one Pharisee* ever opposed the 12 apostles as they preached Christ and His resurrection. In fact, when the Jews wanted to *kill* the 12, they were saved *by a Pharisee,* as Luke tells us in Acts 5, saying:

**“...they...took counsel to slay them. *Then...a Pharisee,* named Gamaliel...said...Ye men of Israel...Refrain from these men, and let them alone...*lest haply ye be found even to fight against God”* (Acts 533-35,38,39).**

I think he said that because he and a lot of *other* Pharisees had started to believe on Christ. All we know for sure is that the Pharisees never once opposed the preaching of Christ in the Book of Acts. It was the *Sadducees* who opposed it in Acts.

And you know why! It’s because they didn’t believe in resurrection, and the 12 were preaching *Christ’s* resurrection. That’s why it says in Acts 4:1,2 that

**“...as they spake unto the people...*the Sadducees,* came upon them, Being grieved *that they*...*preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead.”***

And it was the Sadducees who tried to *kill* Paul in the last chapter, just like they tried to kill the 12 earlier in Acts. Did you notice in the last chapter that when that murderous mob tried to kill Paul that he didn’t perceive of *them* that some were Pharisees and some were Sadducees? How come he suddenly perceived it here of the council in verse 6? I believe it’s because there *were* no Pharisees in that murderous mob. Why else would Paul make note of the fact that he saw some Pharisees *here* on the council?

Either way, now that he saw those Pharisees, he began preaching the gospel to them. He started in verse 6 by saying he had been called in question about the hope and resurrection of the dead. The hope of the dead *is* the resurrection of the dead. If you don’t believe you’ll rise from the dead, you *have* no hope! And Paul had been preaching how *Christ* rose from the dead.

And after a Jew believed that Jesus was God in the flesh, like some of the Pharisees were starting to believe, the next thing he had to believe was that Christ rose from the dead, as Paul told the Romans when he wrote,

**“...if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, *and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead,* thou shalt be saved” (Romans 10:9).**

The thing to remember about that verse is that Paul was talking about Jews there. Romans 9-11 is all about Israel. Romans 9 is about Israel’s past, Romans 11 is about Israel’s future, and Romans 10 is about Israel’s present in the dispensation of grace. If a Jew wants to be saved today, in the dispensation of grace, he has to *start* by believing that Jesus is his Lord, and that He rose from the dead. Remember, *unsaved* Jews concocted a story that attempted to explain away Christ’s resurrection, and that story was popular in the Jewish community (Mt.28:11-15).

So, since Paul knew the Pharisees already suspected Jesus was their Lord after He rose from the dead, he started his gospel message here in our text by speaking of His resurrection. You see, preaching Christ’s resurrection was the *real* reason Paul had been called in question that day. Oh, they’d trumped up some false charges against him, saying that he was guilty of being against the people of Israel, the law, and the temple. But every Jew on that council knew the *real* reason he’d been called in question was because he preached that Jesus was their Lord, and that He rose from the dead.

And when he stood with the Pharisees in verse 6, the Pharisees rallied to his defense in verses 7,8 by saying that if a spirit or angel had told him that Christ had spoken to him, then they had better believe him, or they’d be found doing what Gamaliel said—fighting against God (v.9)!

Now if Paul had been given a chance to keep preaching, he would have told them what he said in Romans 4:24,25, where he wrote,

**“...Jesus our Lord...was delivered for our offences, and was raised again *for our justification.”***

But before Paul could tell them that, it says in verse 10 of our passage:

**“And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them, and to bring him into the castle” (Acts 23:10).**

Here we see the government once again saving Paul from his enemies. In our last lesson, we saw that this was a type of how God saves *us* from enemies like killers and persecutors by using the government and law enforcement agencies, as we see typified with Paul’s experience here yet again.

Now if you’re thinking that Paul was some superhuman superhero who didn’t let all this get him down, think again. If Paul didn’t need some encouragement here, the Lord wouldn’t have *given* him some in the last verse of our text, where it says,

**“And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome” (Acts 21:11).**

Now here I want you to notice what it *doesn’t* say. It doesn’t say the Lord comforted Paul by saying that he’d live and not die, because the Lord knew Paul didn’t *care* if he lived or died! The Lord knew that all Paul cared about was testifying for the Lord, so He comforted him by assuring him that he’d get the chance to testify in Rome as he had in Jerusalem.

Do you know what *else* it doesn’t say here? It doesn’t say the Lord told Paul, “I told you so. I told you the Jews in Jerusalem would not receive your testimony about Me. That’s why I sent you to the Gentiles.” “I told you so” are words the Lord never said to Paul anywhere, and they are words He never says to *us* either, no matter how often we ignore what he says, and get into trouble for it, as Paul did here.

Do you know what *else* it doesn’t say here? It doesn’t say that *James* came to comfort Paul, or any of the other 12 apostles, all of whom lived right there in Jerusalem. Now to be fair to them, they might not have been *allowed* to visit Paul in jail under those tense circumstances. A high-profile prisoner like Paul, who was the center of such tumult in Jerusalem, might not have been allowed visitors.

But I personally think they *would* have been allowed to see Paul, because verse 11 says the Lord waited until “the night following” to comfort Paul in prison. Why would He wait until *the next night* to comfort him unless He was waiting to see if *the 12* would go comfort Paul? I personally think they *didn’t* visit him because they had been peacefully coexisting with Rome now that the devil had diverted the persecution that once came their way to Paul, and going to visit him would associate them with that troublemaker.

But either way, the lesson for us is that even when none of God’s people come to comfort us in our troubles, *the Lord* is always there for us. Of course, today He doesn’t comfort us *out loud* as He did for Paul. Today He uses His Word and His people to comfort His saints. So don’t forget to comfort your brethren when you see they’re troubled.

But now I have a question for you. As I’m sure you’d agree, the thought of *the Rapture* is one of the things in God’s Word that He uses to comfort us. I mean, knowing that Christ could come for us *at any moment* has gotten many a believer through many a difficult life.

But we just read a verse in verse 11 that said the Lord *couldn’t* have come for *Paul* at any moment. The Lord told Paul he had to testify in Rome first. That means the Rapture could *not* have come until *after* Paul testified, right?

I bring this to your attention because this verse is used to prove what we call the post-Tribulation position, the position that says the Lord won’t rapture us until after the Tribulation—meaning we’ll have to go *through* the Tribulation, instead of getting raptured before it, as our apostle Paul makes clear in his epistles, especially his Thessalonian epistles. Years ago there was actually a *grace* pastor who held the post-Trib position, and he used this verse as a prooftext.

But if you think it through, this is not a terribly difficult argument to answer, because *after* Paul testified in Rome, he told Titus in Titus 2:13 to be

***“Looking for that blessed hope,* and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.”**

So the Rapture may not have been able to come for that brief time during the transitional Book of Acts, but once Paul testified in Rome, it’s been our imminent hope ever since. The resurrection of the dead is our hope, but the Rapture is our *blessed* hope! Who wants to die? Not me!

And that’s the reason we examine the Scriptures as carefully as we do in these lessons. It’s because little misunderstandings like that can lead to *great big* misunderstandings that can rob us of the comfort of the Rapture, and a lot of *other* comforts we have in Scripture as well.

Let me give you an example of that. Look back at verse 8, where it says:

**“For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.”**

Did you ever wonder why the Sadducees would deny the existence of spirits and angels in addition to denying the resurrection? I believe it is because one error led them to the others.

Think it through. If you don’t believe a dead body can live after it dies, it must be because you don’t believe in life after death. And if you don’t believe in life after death, then you have to believe that there’s also no *spirit* in man that lives on after we die either. And *that* leads you to believe there’s no such *thing* as spirits. And *that* leads you to believe there’s no such thing as angels, because the psalmist said,

**“...God...maketh His angels *spirits...”* (Psalm 104:1,4).**

God says that His angels are spirits, but if you don’t *believe* in spirits, you can’t believe in angels either. Did you notice that verse 8 delineates three things the Sadducees didn’t believe in: resurrection, spirits, and angels. But when Paul went on to say that the Pharisees *did* believe in those things, he said that they confessed “both,” not “all three.” That’s because he lumped angels and spirits together.

But do you see how one error led them to another, and how we need to be careful to examine *every word of Scripture?* Because if we’re off on *one* doctrine, it can snowball into an *avalanche* of false teaching. So together let’s resolve to continue to carefully consider every word of God’s Word until the Lord comes for us.