

PAUL'S TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COURT, THE GREAT SANHEDRIN: GOD'S GUIDANCE AND PRESENCE THROUGH TERRIBLE STRAIN ACTS 22:22–23:11

Introduction

It is difficult to imagine the strain and pressure that constantly confronted Paul. The present passage shows how the Lord guides us and stands with us when pressure and strain weigh ever so heavily upon us.

- I. Paul's claim to legal rights (vv. 22:22-30).
- II. Paul's great claim: a good conscience (v. 23:1).
- III. Paul's due respect for the authority of Scripture (vv. 23:2-5).
- IV. Paul's daring strategy launched by the Spirit of God (vv. 23:6-10).
- V. Paul's terrible strain but the Lord's glorious assurance (v. 23:11).

I. *Acts 22:22–30 Paul's Claim to Legal Rights*

Paul's claim to legal rights. Note six points.

- 1. Paul was violently rejected by the mob. As soon as the crowd heard the word *Gentile*, they reacted violently. Full of fury and rage, they cried out for Paul's death. The picture is descriptive. They were throwing off their cloaks, apparently to stone him, and flinging dust up into the air, a sign of fury and deep grief.
 - 2. Paul was again rescued by the soldiers. However, this time the centurion was fed up with the matter. He could not figure out why the crowd exploded so violently against Paul, so he planned to get to the truth by flogging Paul (see *Flogging*, Jn. 19:1).
 - 3. Paul claimed his legal rights as a Roman citizen. It was a serious crime to scourge a Roman citizen. Every citizen was considered by law to be one of the citizens of the Emperor himself. Anyone who flogged a Roman citizen jeopardized his own life, so the centurion stopped the punishment immediately and went and told the commander.
 - 4. Paul verified his Roman citizenship before the commander. Note: Paul's citizenship superseded that of the soldier's. He was born a Roman citizen whereas the soldier had bought his citizenship.
 - 5. Paul and his rights were respected. The commander left Paul, and "was alarmed." And he had reason to be, for a Roman citizen was being attacked by a Jewish mob and he, the commander, had almost been drawn into a serious crime by the whole affair.
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6. The commander was determined to find out what caused the riot. On the very next day he called the whole Sanhedrin to appear before him in an official meeting. Note: Paul had been held as a prisoner and had been chained all night. From this point on, Paul's long journey to Rome began, but it was not to be the journey Paul had planned. He would enter Rome as a prisoner, not as a man free to move about as he wished. His imprisonment would last about five years.

The commander brought Paul before them (the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court). This is the point: God was behind the scene of all that was happening, directing the whole affair. God sent Paul forth to bear witness before the Jews in Jerusalem. This is clear from what the Lord told Paul (Acts 23:11).

Thought 1. Note two striking lessons:

- 1) The Lord was able to use Paul as His witness because Paul was given over to the Lord entirely. How many of us, when facing opposition, arise and become more concerned about saving our own necks instead of bearing testimony for Christ? The great need of the hour is to be under the control of the Lord so much that we know that what is happening is being used *of the Lord*.
- 2) The Lord will move events to use us if we are truly His, no matter how trying and overwhelming the events may be.

ACTS 22:22 JUDAIZERS

The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" **Acts 22: 22**

The Jewish mob did not object to Paul reaching the Gentiles. There were Gentile converts in Judaism. Their objection was that the Gentiles were being given the privilege of following God without becoming Jews first, without being circumcised and accepting the law. (See *Judaizers*, Gal. 2:4.) □

II. *Acts 23:01 A Good Conscience*

Paul's great claim — a good conscience. Note two points.

1. Paul *looked straight*, looked steadfastly upon the council. He was trying to gain rapport with them or else stare them down. There is also a possibility that he was trying to see if he recognized any of his former acquaintances of twenty-five years ago.

Ezek 3:8-9 "But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house."

2. Paul made one of the greatest claims possible — that he had lived before God "in all good conscience." He was apparently referring to the years since his conversion. He

was saying to the council that his conversion to Christ and his life since that day had not been displeasing to God, but instead pleasing. He was innocent of breaking the law of God and Moses. His conscience was pure, clear.

Acts 24:16 So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

Rom 13:5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

2 Cor 1:12 Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

Heb 9:14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

Heb 10:22 Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

1 Tim 1:5 The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

1 Tim 1:19 Holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith.

III. *Acts 23:2–5* **Respect for the Authority of Scripture**

Paul's due respect for the authority of Scripture. The high priest interpreted Paul's claim as blasphemy and had him slapped. Paul immediately reacted, firing the law of God against the high priest, accusing him of breaking the law by having him slapped. Very simply, Paul called the high priest a hypocrite, for while he sat in judgment, he broke the law.

William Barclay points out that striking a man was prohibited by Jewish law: "He who strikes the cheek of an Israelite, strikes, as it were, the glory of God." And "He that strikes a man strikes the Holy One" (*The Acts of The Apostles*, p. 180). Therefore, Paul lashed out at the presiding officer, not knowing that he was addressing the high priest.

When Paul was informed that he had rebuked the high priest, he immediately apologized. Why? Not out of fear, but because Scripture forbade speaking against the ruler of God's people (see Exo. 22:28).

Thought 1. Note two significant lessons.

- 1) There was Paul's loyalty to Scripture. As soon as he knew that he had disobeyed Scripture, he sought repentance.

2 Tim 3:16 *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*

2 Pet 1:19 *And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*

Job 23:12 *I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.*

Psa 119:105 *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*

Prov 6:23 *For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life.*

2) There was Paul's boldness in proclaiming the teaching of Scripture and the hypocrisy of those who professed to obey God but did not.

Mat 7:21 *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."*

Mark 7:6 *He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'"*

Titus 1:16 *They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.*

1 John 3:18 *Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

IV. Acts 23:06–10 Guidance of the Holy Spirit

Paul's daring strategy launched by the Spirit of God. Paul was being led step by step by the Lord to bear testimony for Him (v. 11 see Mt. 10:18-19; Lk. 12:11-12). What happened in this scene is the height of drama. Paul knew that he had lost all hope of a fair hearing since he had rebuked the high priest. However, he perceived something. Representatives from the two major parties of Jewish belief were present, and he knew they were bitterly opposed to each other. He conceived a plan whereby he might be able to pit them against each other. He cried out that he was a member of the Pharisee party and had been dragged before the court because he held the belief of the Pharisees.

=> The Pharisees believed in the spiritual world and the resurrection (see *Pharisees*, Acts 23:8).

=> The Sadducees did not believe in the spiritual world nor in the resurrection (see *Sadducees*, Acts 23:8).

His strategy worked all too well. The two parties became so engaged in debate and arguing against each other that they were about to tear Paul apart. He had to be rescued by the soldiers again.

Thought 1. The leadership of God in this manoeuvre by Paul is phenomenal. On a human level, it is not likely the two parties would become so divisive that they would forget all about Paul. What happened is just what Christ had promised: Christ said he would provide the answer when believers are called upon by the world to give an answer for their faith. Apparently, on a spiritual level, the Lord was guiding and manoeuvring the situation, working it out for good by keeping Paul from being tried by the Jewish court. The point is that God leads the believer through pressure and strain, no matter how severe it may be.

Mat 10:19 *“But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say.”*

Luke 21:15 *“For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.”*

Thought 2. Note two things.

- 1) Religious men of politics (Sadducees) can be tragically deceived about the truth of God and the spiritual world. Men seek power at the expense of their soul's salvation.
- 2) Religionists, even strict religionists who hold to Scripture, can be deceived and distort the truth for the sake of their own customs and traditions, position and livelihood. (See Acts 12:1-4)

ACTS 23:08 SADDUCEES

The Sadducees were the religious and political liberals of Christ's day. They were the wealthy, the aristocratic, the governing class of leaders in Israel. Many Sadducees served on the nation's governing body, the Sanhedrin. The Chief Priest himself was usually a Sadducee who presided over the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin ruled the people in behalf of the Roman empire (Acts 4:1-2; 5:17). The Romans readily saw to it that the Sadducees held the positions of leadership in the nation, for the Sadducees favoured Greek customs over Jewish customs. And they aided the Romans in doing away with religious practices and instituting Greek and Roman customs (Hellenism).

They are thought to have arisen out of the same struggle as the Pharisees around B.C. 175. However, they were always the fewest in number among the various sects of Jewish belief.

Several things should be noted.

1. The Sadducees were secular and materialistic minded. They were the independent thinkers, the rationalists of their day.
2. They were heavily entrenched in the priesthood of Jesus' day (see Acts. 4:1-2; 5:17). They readily collaborated with the Roman government in order to protect their position, power and wealth.

3. For the most part they denied the supernatural: the resurrection and miracles, life after death and the existence of beings in other dimensions such as angels and spirits (Mt. 22:23; Acts 23:8). To them there was no heaven or hell, no existence whatsoever except on this earth. A man died and was annihilated, just ceased to exist. There was no such thing as rewards or punishment in an afterlife, no eternal life. □

ACTS 23: 08 PHARISEES

The word means the separated ones. The Pharisees were strict religionists. Their religious sect arose about B.C. 175. A Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, tried to stamp out the Jewish religion and replace it with Greek customs and practices. A number of Jewish men opposed this threat and determined among themselves to save the Jewish religion. They refused to practice Greek customs and dedicated themselves to practicing the Jewish law in the strictest sense. They felt that by carrying out every little detail of the Jewish law and by teaching others to do the same, they could save the Jewish religion and nation and keep it from dying out.

Several things should be noted.

1. They were the orthodox of their day — a sect or school of religious thought. They were organized solely for preserving the law and the Jewish religion. Thereby, they were to save the Jewish nation.
2. They were strict literalists. The Jewish law was expanded into thousands and thousands of little rules and regulations by the Scribes. These rules and regulations were known as the Scribal or Oral Law. More than fifty volumes or books were eventually needed to hold the regulations.
3. The Pharisees were a body of the most zealous religionists.
4. There were never many Pharisees — never more than 6,000. The strictness and demands of the sect were too hard for the common people.
5. They were in dead earnest — dedicated and zealous, self-denying, and moral. No man could give his life to so desperate and restrictive a task unless he was totally genuine.
6. They were self-righteous, heartless, and hypocritical (Lk. 18:9). They lacked any sense of need or sin (Lk. 7:39).
7. They were bitterly opposed to the Sadducees, hating and despising them, feeling that the Sadducees were traitors to the nation.

However, the Pharisees were forced to quietly cooperate with the Sadducees because the Sadducees were the primary ruling party of the nation.

8. They were the main opponents of Jesus Christ and were unsparing in their denunciation of Him. Their savage attacks were primarily for two reasons. First, He was not a graduate of any of their rabbinical schools, nor a member of any of their religious sects. Second, He attacked their rules and regulations which had been added to God's law. □

V. *Acts 23: 11 God's Care and Presence*

For two days Paul had been under a frightening, terrible strain. His mental and physical capabilities had been taxed to the limit. Twice he had to be snatched from the clutch of a frenzied mob by a Roman patrol. And the warning he had received not to venture into Jerusalem was bound to be preying upon his mind. How much more could he take? What was his breaking point? God knew, just as He always does. The scene was this: it was the night following and Paul was deeply discouraged and questioning, sensing failure and feeling hopeless and helpless. And he had been in such a state for over twenty-four hours. Note a significant fact: no mention is made of any support from James or the other apostles or elders of the church (see Acts 12:5). Paul apparently stood alone. But note: the Lord stood by him.

=> The Lord gave some appearance to him.

=> The Lord said, *Take courage* (*tharsei*), be of good heart.

=> The Lord assured him that his witness in Jerusalem was of God.

=> The Lord assured him that he would bear witness in Rome.

Thought 1. The Lord will stand by our side, encouraging and seeing us through all — if we are bearing true witness for Him.

Thought 2. The Lord wishes His servants to always be cheerful and courageous, no matter the trial. The life of His servant is under the care and leadership of the Lord.

Psa 23:4 *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Psa 27:1 *The Lord is my light and my salvation — whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life — of whom shall I be afraid?*

Psa 28:7 *The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.*

Psa 40: 17 *Yet I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer: O my God, do not delay.*

Isa 43:2 *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.*

Exo 33:14 *The Lord replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."*

Isa 41:10 *"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."*

Isa 50:9 *It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.*

Mat 28:20 *"And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

2 Tim 4:16-18 *At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Heb 13:5 *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*

Heb 13:6 *So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*

Rev 2:10 *Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. ■*