

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Paul in Custody Acts 22:23-23:11

Intro: Up to this point in Paul's ministry, he has been a free ambassador for Jesus Christ for the better part of 20 years. He has been at liberty to travel to wherever the Lord has led him, to stay as long as necessary and to be on his way whenever he deemed it appropriate to leave. But now, here in **ch22**, Paul's status changes from free minister of the gospel to that of a prisoner of the Roman government. From now until the end of Acts, Paul will remain in Roman custody and while this is the end of his time as a free man, it is not the end of his witness for the Lord or his usefulness to God and to God's people.

Knowing the reputation for cruelty that Roman officials had rightly earned throughout their bloody history, you would think that being in Roman hands would be worse for the apostle Paul than being in Jewish hands. But, as we read through our text today, we'll soon see that Paul was actually better off in the hands of the secular authorities than he would have been in the hands of his own people. This is mainly because the Jews were trying to kill him and the Romans just wanted to keep the peace. They had arrested Paul but not only did they not know what he had done – or supposed to have done – they didn't know who he was or how they were to properly treat him.

In today's text, which will conclude **ch22** and cover **vs1-11** of **ch23**, we'll see Paul in relation to 3 different groups: Paul in Roman custody (**23-29**); Paul before the Jewish authorities (**23:1-10**); Paul and the Lord (**11**).

23-29 – Last week, we covered the opening scene of this dramatic story. Paul, in the temple, was falsely accused by some Jews from Asia of bringing a Gentile into the temple area. Of course, the crowd goes wild; grabs up Paul for a quick dispatching but was prevented from completing the job by the timely arrival of the Roman army. The Romans didn't know what was going on, they just knew something was going on and they wanted it to stop. They picked a battered Paul up out of the mob and started to carry him off but he asked permission to speak to the crowd and oddly enough, the commander allowed it. He probably hoped to determine the cause of the riot from Paul's address. But, that didn't happen. If anything, the commander

was even more confused after Paul's address than he was before it.

Now we find that the commander had another problem. His job was to keep order in the city. To do that, he had to understand what was going on. Based on the crowd's reaction, he must have concluded that there was something Paul was guilty of but had not confessed. So he figured the only way he was going to get to the bottom of this is by torturing the prisoner. He will have to force this man to tell him the reason behind of the commotion, because until that happens, he'll never be able to restore order in the city.

So, the soldiers took Paul away and stretched him out to be flogged. This wasn't the normal Jewish flogging, which was bad enough, but the dreaded Roman flagellum. It was a beating so severe that in some cases it resulted in the death of the victim. It was what was done to Jesus before his crucifixion. As they were about to begin this dreaded punishment, Paul asked a question: "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?"

It wasn't legal and Paul knew it. In fact, everyone knew it. Not only was it illegal to flog an uncondemned Roman citizen, it was also illegal to bind one. These Roman officials quickly began to perceive their legal dilemma.

Paul had mentioned his status of citizenship to the centurion who then passed it on to the commander. Claudius must have been shocked to learn that this little Jewish troublemaker who spoke Aramaic and Greek, whom he originally thought was an Egyptian terrorist, was actually a Roman citizen! Claudius himself had only acquired this status through great expense so he was curious how Paul had come by it. To his surprise, Paul was actually ahead of the commander in this matter because he had been born a citizen of Rome. This meant either Paul's father or grandfather had done some great service for the Roman officials in the region of Cilicia. We don't know how His father acquired his citizenship but we have already seen that Paul knew how to use it to further the cause of Christ.

What we see in this passage is the Roman government functioning wisely and according to its own laws thus, we see the state functioning as it should function. What is the role of the state? The state exists: (1) to establish, maintain, and assure justice; and (2) to provide for the defense of its citizens - justice and defense. That's exactly what the Roman commander, operating on behalf of the Roman government, was in the process of doing. He was

attempting to maintain order (defense) and he was concerned with justice. He was operating under the requirements of explicit Roman law. Later, when he calls the Sanhedrin together to determine what their accusation against Paul was, he was attempting to pursue his concern for justice even further.

30-23:1-10 – Having discovered that Paul was a Roman citizen, the commander now faced 2 serious problems: 1) he had to inform Paul of what the official charges were against him and; 2) he had to produce some official charges for his own records and to give to his superiors. Paul must have done something particularly notorious or why else would so many people want him dead? Still, nobody seemed to know what Paul's notorious crimes were. This Roman official had found himself in quite a conundrum. What can he do to get himself out of this legal mess?

He decided that the best course of action was to call the Sanhedrin together. This was the highest governing body in Israel. It was a group of 70 (or 71) men who were the official legal and religious representatives of the nation. It was their responsibility to interpret and apply the sacred Jewish Law to the affairs of the nation and to try those who violated that Law. Surely the roman commander could get a straight answer from this august assembly.

There is an obvious contrast here between the Romans and the Sanhedrin, the leaders of God's people. The Romans were promoting justice and maintaining order, or at least trying to. But that wasn't the case in the Jewish court. There was neither a concern for justice nor a desire to maintain public order present in this group. These men were not interested in justice. They just wanted to get rid of Paul. If you're looking for justice in this situation, you're far more likely to get it from the Romans. The Jews weren't interested in order either! The disorder that had taken place in the courtyard of the temple the day before and was repeated even after Paul's address to the people in Aramaic now burst forth even on the floor of the Sanhedrin itself!

Paul begins his defense with an opening statement and much like his address before the mob in the temple, he doesn't get very far. Paul makes a curious statement here: that he has "lived in all good conscience before God until this day." This is a striking and bold declaration. Clearly, the Jewish authorities were offended by it but knowing Paul's past, how can he possibly say this with a straight face? He had been in great error during his days in

Judaism, as he readily admits. He had persecuted the church. He was instrumental in the death of some of its most important members (Stephen). How could Paul say he had lived all his life up until now in good conscience before God?

The answer is: Paul did live in good conscience. He was very wrong, of course. He was so wrong that it required the intervention of the Lord Jesus Christ to show him how wrong he was. But in those early days, Paul didn't think he was wrong. In fact, he fervently believed he was right. He had lived up to the light that he had and that's all a good conscience requires. That's why he could later say that, concerning the righteousness of the Law, he was faultless ([Phil 3:6](#)). He wasn't faultless in God's sight. But so far as he knew, he had lived in good conscience.

Human society tends to put a high value to a good (clear) conscience. That's why the Jews took offense. Conscience is the inner witness that approves when we do right or disapproves when we do wrong. Let your conscience be your guide (Jiminy Cricket). But here's where the principle breaks down. Conscience doesn't set the standard for right and wrong, it merely applies it. The conscience of a criminal would bother him if he truthfully ratted out his fellow criminals just as much as our consciences would bother us if we lied about another Christian. The conscience doesn't set the standard it just applies the standard each individuals already has.

So, while we can and should listen to our conscience, it's not an infallible guide to right conduct. Conscience will tell you that you shouldn't do wrong and you should do right, but it can't tell you what is right or wrong. Only the Bible, the written Word of God, can teach you that. When you have your Bible open and when the Holy Spirit is shining on its pages teaching you what is right; then your conscience will tell you that you ought to do it. If you don't have God's Word then even though conscience will tell you to do the right thing, you won't know what the right thing is and you will more than likely be mistaken, just as Paul was in his earlier life.

The conscience is like a window that lets in light. God's Word is the light and the cleaner the window is, the more the light shines in. As the window gets dirty, the light gets dimmer and eventually, the light becomes darkness. A good conscience is one that let's in God's light so that we are properly convicted if we do wrong and are encouraged if we do right. A defiled

conscience is one that has been sinned against so much that it is no longer dependable. A seared conscience (evil) is one that convicts a person when they do right – this worst case scenario is far too common.

The High Priest's response to Paul's declaration of a clear conscience was to command someone to smack Paul in the mouth. This wasn't just impetuous or harsh – it was also illegal! Clearly, Paul's statement offended him. How could someone accused of such serious crimes claim to have a clear conscience? Or maybe Ananias was convicted by the integrity of Paul's claim. Paul did have a clear conscience and it was evident in his speech and demeanor. History tells us that Ananias failed to live up to the honor of his position. He was well known for his greed, stooping so low to the point of stealing the tithes meant for the common priests. He was an unscrupulous man who used violence and assassination to further his own selfish interests.

No matter what his motive was, the order to strike Paul was illegal – contrary to the very Law he was claiming to uphold. Thus, in his response, Paul exposed the hypocrisy of the man who gave the order. One who commands a defenseless and innocent man to be struck in the face is indeed a whitewashed wall: having a white veneer of purity that covers obvious corruption. The men of the Sanhedrin were supposed to be examples of the Mosaic Law but the command to strike Paul was contrary to both the spirit and the letter of the Law ([Deut 25:1-2](#)). Only a guilty man could be beaten and Paul hadn't even been tried yet.

Paul's words to Ananias were actually more prophetic than he realized; God would in fact strike him down. When the Jews revolted against Rome in 66AD, Ananias had to flee for his life because of his well known sympathies with Rome. The Jewish fighters eventually found him hiding in an aqueduct at Herod's palace and killed him. Despite all of his scheming and bribery, Ananias' final days were lived out as a hunted animal and ended at the hands of his own people. It was an ignominious death for a despicable man.

Paul's point was obviously valid but yet, when he learns that he is speaking about the High Priest, he immediately placed himself beneath the Law that he was anxious to uphold. Notice, Paul didn't actually apologize to Ananias. He showed respect to the office of the High Priest but not for the man holding that office. Why didn't Paul recognize the High Priest? There are

several possibilities. Paul hadn't ran in these circles for 20 yrs and may have never met Ananias personally. Ananias might not have been wearing his High Priestly attire for this meeting or Paul had bad eyesight and couldn't tell who gave the command. It's even been surmised that Paul was using holy sarcasm here as in, "How could someone as honorable as the High Priest possibly give such a hypocritical and despicable order?"

In any case, after he was struck, Paul realized it would be impossible for him to get a fair hearing so the smart thing to do was to end it as soon as possible and trust God to use the Romans to protect him from the Jews. Paul knew the Sanhedrin was divided between Sadducees (liberal secularists) and Pharisees (religious conservatives). These 2 groups typically hated each other and only seemed to agree on defeating the gospel and church of Jesus Christ. Well, Paul had been a Pharisee and he declared to the council that the only reason he stood before them was his belief and hope in the resurrection. Now, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection and the Sadducees didn't, so this set the 2 parties arguing amongst themselves.

Paul wasn't wrong. The lynchpin of the gospel he had preached all over the Roman Empire was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, the resurrection of Jesus points to and proves a general resurrection for all humanity – some for eternal blessing, others for eternal judgment. The point is: all Christian ministry is based on the belief that there is a reality beyond what we can see and know physically. We live in a culture that focuses on the visible, the observable and ignores or discounts the invisible, intangible. The problem with that mindset is that the tangible is only temporary while the invisible is eternal. Christians must stand up in this culture and say that they believe in the resurrection.

11 – Finally, we see Paul with the Lord, with the risen Jesus. This isn't the first time Jesus appeared to Paul and it won't be the last. Clearly, this was at a low point in Paul's ministry. He'd been given 2 once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to preach the gospel to his countrymen that came to nothing. Now he's faced with an imprisonment of undetermined length and the apparent end of his usefulness to the Lord. It was at this low ebb that Jesus appeared once more to encourage and instruct Paul. This appears to be a unique manifestation of the physical presence of Jesus with Paul.

The Lord's message to Paul was one of courage. Be of good cheer... just means "Take courage!" Jesus often said this during His earthly ministry and believers today can always take courage in difficult times because we know the Lord is with us and He will see us through.

This is also a message of commendation. Jesus didn't rebuke Paul for coming to Jerusalem or for the miserable results of his testifying. Jesus actually commended Paul for the witness he had given even though his witness hadn't been received. See, Paul wasn't responsible for the results of his witness; his responsibility was to bring the Word of God and testify of Jesus Christ. The results were God's responsibility. Jesus complimented him on a job well done.

Finally, it was a message of confidence. Paul would go to Rome! There was more for Paul to do! These are the greatest words a faithful child of God can ever hear. Paul had been given his next assignment and he was raring to get on with it! Just because Paul was under arrest didn't mean he was off-duty. God had called him to be a witness for Jesus and that is what he will be and he will be a witness for Jesus until the day he dies. What encouragement this promise must have brought to Paul in the weeks following; difficult weeks where fanatics try to kill him, Jewish leaders will lie about him and Roman officials will ignore him. Through all of this, Paul knew the Lord was with him and was fulfilling His perfect plan to get His faithful servant to Rome.

The Lord's promise to Paul is applicable to us today. Like Paul, we should take courage in knowing that the Lord is with us and will never leave us nor forsake us. Like Paul, Jesus is pleased with us. How do I know? Because we are still here! Since we're still here, that clearly means there is more for us to do. There are more people to bring to Christ, more truth to be discovered in His Word and apply to our lives, more ways to glorify the Lord, more people to pray with and for, more humble ways to serve God's people, more opportunities to strengthen and encourage weary saints, more chances to teach God's truth – share God's truth – live God's truth.

None of us have outgrown our usefulness to God – we are still here for a reason! Take courage – the Lord's presence also comes with the inherent promise of His continued protection. If we are actively and faithfully pursuing His will for our lives, He will preserve us until we have fully completed the entire ministry He has planned out for us. 😊