

Who can bring a charge against God's elect?

Littlebourne - 15th October 2023 - Acts 23:1-11

We're at about AD 58 ish in Acts - you'll remember that Paul has heard from the Holy Spirit that he must go to Jerusalem, and that wherever he goes, he will face persecution and suffering. He's arrived at Jerusalem, he's spent some time there and then he's been attacked by a mob in the temple. He's been arrested by the Romans, which rescued him from the crowd, but he was out of the frying pan, into the fire, when they thought it best to interrogate him with torture. He's appealed to his Roman citizenship, which got him out of that one, and now the Tribune, the commander of the Roman forces, is perplexed at why he was being accused of things by the Jews and decides he needs to see what the Jewish high council - the Sanhedrin - says, and get some clearer answers, which is where our passage today begins.

The Sanhedrin consisted of 71 members, including the high priest, other priests and levites, and some ordinary Jews of pure lineage. At this time, they normally met in a place known as the 'hall of hewn stones', which was a room built into the north wall of the temple, that was sort of half-in and half-out of the temple complex, with entrances from both inside the temple area and from outside.

Fort Antonia, the barracks where the Romans have Paul is also on the north side of the temple, adjoining the north wall. Verse 30 of chapter 22 doesn't say whether Paul was brought to the hall of hewn stone, or that the council was brought to Fort Antonia, but in any case, the Roman tribune commanded them to meet, and they do, and Paul is set before them.

As I've said before, we see the hardening of the Jews in Jerusalem to the gospel - the Sanhedrin had seen Jesus, Peter, John, Stephen, now Paul. The time is nearing that Jerusalem will be destroyed, the temple flattened, as Jesus said it would be. It seems that God is giving these people chance after chance to repent and believe. We have historical accounts that tell us that many did, and escaped the coming judgement, but many didn't.

We're around 12 or so years before the end of the temple, the final seige and destruction of Jerusalem, in AD 70, and Paul has another chance to bring the case for Christianity before them, not that it seems they are listening.

v1

And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day."

We start with a maybe quite puzzling statement from Paul. The same person that tells us that he's the chief of sinners, when he writes to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:15):

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

So is Paul really serious about what he's saying here? What is his intention with this statement? Surely this is shorthand, making a point?

One possibility is that what he's saying here is actually completely correct - that he has, really and truly, acted in good conscience all his life. Before his conversion, he considered that what he was doing was right, and after his conversion he has lived out his new life doing what his changed and renewed conscience demands. That's a possibility.

Another interpretation is that he is making a point. He's in effect saying, 'I'm innocent'. He's saying, if you won't accuse me of anything, I'm not confessing to anything.

Many of the people he was talking to would have known him when he was living in Jerusalem, among them, learning from the best of them. They would know how zealous he was for God's law and how he acted in light of that. He calls them 'brothers', which is not exactly the right way to talk to the Sanhedrin. He says in effect "Guys, you know me. You know how seriously I took things and continue to."

Finally, if it's true that he's acting in good conscience before God, then he's making out that in his mind at least, they aren't opposing just him for his message, but they are opposing God and God's message.

v2-

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

In response to this, rather than accuse Paul of something concrete, the high priest orders that Paul be struck on the mouth - as if for what he has said, though not actually arguing against it.

This was no light slap - it was a hard hit, either with a fist or something more. τύπτω - to strike, harm, beat, wound, inflict punishment. The same word is used for the crowd beating Paul in chapter 21. This is not merely symbolic, it's meant to hurt.

The high priest in question at the time was Ananias - not to be confused with Annas of earlier in Acts 4 and John 18. High priests changed pretty regularly in this time, and this Ananias, son of Nebedaeus, was known as a particularly bad one. In his rule from around AD 48-59, he is recorded by Josephus as being a violent and fraudulent man. He eventually meets his demise in AD 66 when the final insurrection against the Romans begins. Jewish fighters would execute him for being a friend of the Romans.

Paul's response to the high priest is strong. He accuses the high priest of hypocrisy - they are seeking to punish him for violations of God's law (unspecified), but in so doing are violating the law themselves. They accuse him of defiling the temple, but defile the temple themselves with their seeking the death of an innocent man.

The imagery is like that which Jesus used - Jesus called the religious leaders of his day whitewashed tombs. In that time, to touch anything associated with the dead was enough to make one unclean. So to mark tombs, the walls, the rock, would be whitewashed, to make it visible and avoidable. It looked nice, but it pointed to death within.

Just as Paul was innocent under the Roman law, and unjustly arrested and bound as we saw last week, so now the high priest and the Sanhedrin are seeking to punish Paul without a real trial.

Now Paul is acting angrily, reacting to what is happening, not unreasonably perhaps.

v4

4 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.'"

Those who hear Paul immediately seize the opportunity - has Paul made a mistake and now they actually have something to go against him with?

How could Paul have not known it was the high priest? There are some indications that he might have made this mistake innocently. First, we know Paul had trouble with his eyes, he says as much in his first letter that we have - to the Galatians, written probably before this event. Second, the high priest since he was last in Jerusalem had changed - he wasn't necessarily up to date.

Speaking ill of the rulers of God's people was indeed a prohibition in the Old Testament law. Paul quotes from Exodus 22:28, from a section that lists out many rules for the Israelites straight from what God was telling Moses:

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

So to really curse a ruler of the people was prohibited. One way to interpret what Paul says in response to being made aware that it's the high priest is that Paul accepts he has made a mistake and he fesses up. He isn't defensive about it, but freely admits he was wrong.

Alternatively, Paul might have known exactly what he was doing and his response to those that call him out for his stong words is sarcastic. He's saying "Oh, you're the high priest? How could I tell when you're acting like this?!" The charge of hypocrisy stands - this man is not acting how one should in that God appointed office of high priest.

v6-

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.

These two groups of people have cropped up before - when Jesus was in Jerusalem, as well as earlier in Acts. Both of these groups emerged between the Old Testament and New Testament eras, and had very different views about politics and religion. There was a third group, the Essenes, who were much less argumentative and more monastic - they were probably the same as the people at Qumran, that kept to themselves more and from whom we have the dead sea scrolls, but they were a small minority. The main division theologically and politically was between Pharisee and Saducee.

When Christ was on earth, the Pharisees were the major opposition to Him. Jesus witnessed against their corrupting of the law, their hypocrisy. But after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the Saducees were more opposed - they could not abide the idea that Jesus rose from the dead. In Acts 4, it's the Saducees that lead the charge against the Apostles, and in Acts 5 again it's the Saducees that are behind the arrest of the Apostles, because they were teaching about resurrection and immortality that come from the gospel.

Typically, the two groups are battling each other, but when Christ came, or the Apostles came, or now when Paul is before them, they are united in their opposition to a common enemy.

Now, Paul tells them that he's a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. He exploits their animosity to each other to show that really they are not united in their opposition to him, but oppose him for different reasons.

Paul was saved in the foregoing chapter from being beaten, when he mentioned he was a Roman citizen, now he mentions he is a Pharisee, to get him out of things again. As much as Paul was called to suffer for the gospel, and to go to places and endure hardships that were difficult, the suffering is not the point. Paul went to Jerusalem, because the Holy Spirit instructed him to, and because there was an opportunity to speak to those there, and to proclaim the gospel - even to go to Rome to potentially see Ceasar, as we later find.

Suffering is not something to be sought out, Christianity should not be a religion of self-flagellation and deliberately making ourselves miserable. There are times for hardship, but in the service of something greater, never suffering for suffering's sake. When Christ went meekly to the cross, accepting the worst suffering imaginable, it was for a clear purpose. When Paul suffers for the gospel, it is *for* the gospel.

Anyway, the result of Paul's comment is a house divided - the Sanhedrin becomes less of a council and more of a battleground.

v9-

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?" 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.

It turns out that the men of the Sanhedrin don't care as much about Paul as they do about their own differences. The whole situation turns around - some of the Pharisees effectively join Paul's side of things and the conflict turns back to what it probably often is in the Sanhedrin.

These scribes of the Pharisees were willing to let Paul off, if it meant getting at the Saducees. The Pharisees say 'what if an angel or spirit spoke to him' - they won't accept that it was Christ, but they will use Paul's words for their own argument against the Saducees.

It soon becomes violent again, so Paul is once again rescued from the Jewish mob by the Romans. After all this, the tribune, the commander, still had no clear idea of what Paul was supposed to have done wrong.

[Of course, finding no fault doesn't always mean things will be easy - Pilate found no fault in Christ, but still gave him up to death.]

v11

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."

Now we see one of the five times where we have recorded the Lord speaking directly to Paul. Here, the Lord gives Paul consolation and comfort, commendation for what he has done thus far and then conviction to go and do the same in Rome.

Paul would have probably already written this, to the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 1:3-5):

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. 5 For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

For Paul, Christ was an immense comfort - he was able to endure what he did because of Christ, to know what was sort of thing was coming and yet go to Jerusalem anyway.

It might seem a cold comfort for God to say 'as you have testified in Jerusalem, almost dead in the process, so too you will in Rome', but this also is an encouragement that this is as bad as it gets, and that as Paul has done well here, he will do well further. Paul also may have been heartened that he had further service to give to Christ - this was his joy, to serve his Lord.

Paul of course will reach Rome - not that he would get there the way he might have imagined, but he would get there. In Acts 19:21, a while before this:

21 Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."

And this is expressed too in his letter to the Romans, written most likely when in Corinth long before this time in Jerusalem.

Conclusion

The verse from Romans 8 came to mind in all this - "Who can bring a charge against God's elect?" In this instance, neither the Romans, not the Jewish leaders, could find anything against Paul.

Romans 8:31-34, written by Paul some time before the events we read about:

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Paul's attitude to what he has been up against is one of confidence in Christ. And his confidence comes from what he considers the heart of the matter - as he said to the Sanhedrin - "it is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial" (v6).

At the centre of Paul's hope, and what should be at the centre of ours, is the completed work of Christ - his life, death and resurrection, that we might be free from sin and raised to new life with him. Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:17-19):

17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Without the resurrection of Christ, nothing has changed - we are still dead in our sins, with no way out. But if Christ really was raised from the dead, then we have the hope and confidence that Paul had.

Our confidence doesn't come from what we have done, how well we have endured, how much we have been able to keep our cool when under pressure. Paul kind of flew off the handle in this passage, with harsh words for the high priest, but whether he or we handle ourselves perfectly is not the grounds of our ultimate confidence. The grounds of our confidence is in what Christ has done. He has paid for our sins, and defeated death, and now is seated at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us, having been given all authority.

Like Paul, we should follow the great commission, being cognizant of that first clause that Jesus says - "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, therefore go". We don't just go, we therefore go, knowing Jesus Christ is in control. Paul knew this, and so must we. And Jesus ends the great commission with another word of comfort: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."