

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermon series titled, □ “The Church that Changed the World.” It is a study through the New Testament book of Acts.

Our text for today is □ Acts 23:1-11. From this text, we are going to learn what to do when you feel like you are at the end of your rope, how to deal with hitting rock bottom, where to turn when you are at the breaking point.

Once again, we are going to learn from the experiences of the apostle Paul. You may recall from our previous studies that Paul is in Jerusalem, where he has experienced one disappointment after another.

Paul had been wrongly accused by partisan Jews of being anti-Jewish and a Gentile sympathizer who had illegally brought Gentiles into the Jewish temple. The accusations were patently false. The angry Jews had their culture-war goggles on so tight they had completely misunderstood and misjudged Paul. Nevertheless, they mobilized a mob and tried to kill him.

The Roman tribune, whose job it was to keep the peace, intervened to apprehend Paul and to quiet the crowd.

Before being taken to the Roman barracks, Paul was granted permission to address the heated mob that sought to kill him. Speaking in their language, Paul shared his testimony of how the resurrected Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and changed his life. Paul tells his story in a respectful, innocuous way. There is no name-calling. No threats. No condescension. No self-righteousness. No hell fire and brimstone. Just a recounting of the facts of his encounter with Jesus and how it changed him.

Paul had hoped that his fellow Jews would respond favorably. But they didn't. They raised their voices, shouting, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."

The Roman tribune then ordered Paul to be brutally tortured through flogging. As Paul was being stretched out to receive the blows, he asserted his Roman citizenship, which, by law, protected him from flogging without a proper trial.

The tribune then called the Jewish religious authorities, the chief priests and the council known as the Sanhedrin to assemble and interrogate Paul.

Paul himself had been a member of the Sanhedrin before his conversion to Christ some two decades earlier. The Sanhedrin was made up of 71 members.¹ It is quite likely that some of the current members knew Paul well and had served alongside him.

In Acts 23:1, Paul begins to address the council.

ESV Acts 23:1 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 addresses the members of the council as brothers, not because they are believers in Jesus, but because they are fellow Jews, some of whom are former colleagues.

Paul looks at his audience intently. There is no glancing away so often characteristic of timidity or insincerity or guilt. He has nothing to hide.

¹ Elwell, Walter A., and Barry J. Beitzel, "Sanhedrin," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1902–4.

In saying that he has lived his life “before God in all good conscience,” Paul is asserting his innocence before God. His conscience harbors no guilt for what he has done for Jesus.

But, in asserting his own innocence, the guilt of the council is implied.

You see, everyone on the Council knew that Paul believed Jesus to be the true Jewish Messiah and that Paul was outspoken about this. That is why he had left the Council many years earlier.

But the Council had repeatedly rejected Jesus as Messiah and had tried to suppress the gospel because they viewed it as a blasphemous heresy. Paul himself had participated in the suppression before his conversion.

So, if Paul is indeed innocent before God, it is because the gospel of Jesus is true. And if the gospel is true, then the Council is guilty of suppressing the truth of God. This connection is not lost on the high priest, as evidenced in □ verse 2.

ESV Acts 23:2 And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

Ananias became high priest long after Paul left the Sanhedrin. Ananias was wealthy and unscrupulous. He used his power and wealth to get his way with both the Roman officials and the Jews. And his way involved exploiting his own people, including some of the poorer priests to gain more wealth for himself. Such exploitation coupled with his courting of Roman power to feather his own nest did not endear him to many of

his Jewish constituents. One commentator describes Ananias as “one of the most disgraceful profaners of the sacred office.”²

By the way, Ananias the high priest is not to be confused with the godly man by the same name who met Paul in Damascus shortly after his encounter with the risen Jesus.

To be punched in the mouth this way was a humiliating insult.³ That Ananias, the corrupt high priest would order it is not surprising. But Paul’s response is. □ Verse 3 records the reply.

ESV Acts 23:3 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?”

To this point, Paul’s response to provocation in Jerusalem has been calm and measured. Here, Paul seems to lose his cool.⁴ And if he did indeed lose it, I can certainly sympathize. In fact, it is almost encouraging. There have been more times that I would like to admit that I have felt unfairly pushed to the breaking point and responded harshly. It is nice to know that Paul, one of my heroes, shares my humanness. At a low ebb, he lashes out.

That is not to say Paul’s remarks are inaccurate. To call Ananias a “whitewashed wall” is to call him a hypocrite. Paul explains the nature of the hypocrisy here in verse 3. He has been brought before the high priest and the council to be judged according to the Jewish law. And yet, Ananias’s order to strike Paul hypocritically violates that law. In the ancient Jewish legal system, the accused was to be considered innocent

² Keener, Craig S., *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 15:1–23:35* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 3269.

³ Keener, 3271.

⁴ Gangel, Kenneth O., *Acts*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 387.

until proven guilty. And Paul's guilt had not yet been proven. So, the high priest who was appointed to uphold the law has just broken it. Hence, Ananias is indeed a whitewashed wall.

Jesus himself used the whitewash imagery for hypocrisy in □ Matthew 23:27, where he says to Jewish religious leaders,

ESV Matthew 23:27 “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.”

Back in □ Acts 23:3, when Paul says to Ananias, “God is going to strike you,” it is not just idle cursing. Paul is pronouncing judgment predictively. A number of years later, Ananias will be assassinated by some Jews.⁵ So, God does indeed strike Ananias.

In the wake of Paul's harsh words, some members of the Council challenge Paul's actions. □ Verse 4 says,

ESV Acts 23:4 Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God's high priest?”

In saying this, the Council is now challenging the legality of Paul's reviling words. Likely they have in mind □ Exodus 22:28, which says,

ESV Exodus 22:28 “You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.”

In □ verse 5 of our text, Paul seems to admit his wrongdoing by citing Exodus 22:28, but he explains it as a mistake of ignorance.

⁵ Keener, 3274.

ESV Acts 23:5 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.’”

Some scholars surmise that Paul must have known that Ananias was the high priest and that he is speaking sarcastically here, as if to say, “Ananias was acting so unlike any high priest should that I didn’t recognize him.”

While such sarcasm is plausible, there are good reasons to take Paul’s claimed ignorance at face value. It is quite possible that Paul had never laid eyes on Ananias before this moment because he had been absent from Jerusalem for many years. Keep in mind, there were no televisions, no newspapers, no magazines, and no internet to splash around images of Ananias for Paul to see while he was gone. His genuine ignorance also comports well with his quotation of Exodus 22:28 as an acknowledgment of his accidental offence.

Regardless, Paul moves past the humiliation of being stuck in the mouth. □ Verse 6 says,

ESV Acts 23:6 Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, . . .

Sadducees and Pharisees represented different sects or schools of thought within Judaism—sort of like denominations. At that time, Sadducees were in the majority, and Ananias, the High Priest was himself a Sadducee.

A key difference between the two groups is that the Sadducees did not believe in the concept of resurrection, but the Pharisees did. This is

relevant because, at the heart of Paul's testimony is his encounter with the *resurrected* Jesus.

Sadducees would have dismissed this out of hand because they don't believe anybody will be resurrected, much less Jesus. In contrast, the Pharisees would have at least been open to the general idea of resurrection.

Being a former member of the Council himself, Paul knows something of its composition, including the presence of both Sadducees and Pharisees and the theological differences between them. With that knowledge, Paul raises his voice to address the entire assembly. In the last part of □ verse 6, he says,

ESV Acts 23:6 . . . “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.”

Paul goes directly to the heart of the matter: the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. This claim lies at the heart of Christianity.

Paul had written about the crucial importance of Christ's resurrection a couple of years prior to his current appearance before the Sanhedrin.⁶ In □ 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, Paul writes to fellow believers:

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? □ 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. □ 14 And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. □ 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about

⁶ House, H. Wayne, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament* (Grand Rapid, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 127.

God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. □ 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. □ 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.

If Christ truly rose from the dead, it validates everything he ever said, including “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

On the other hand, if he did ***not*** rise from the dead, Christianity itself is dead and Christians are pitiful.

That is why Paul says back in □ Acts 23:6, “It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” Christ’s resurrection is the crux of the matter.

Given the presence of Sadducees and Pharisees in the Council, this statement sparks controversy. New flash: Religious people of all stripes, including professing Christians, have a great capacity to fight with each other. Verses □ 7 through 10 describe the fight unfolding.

ESV Acts 23:7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.

□ ESV Acts 23:8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.

□ ESV Acts 23:9 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?”

□ ESV Acts 23:10 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.

This would have been something to behold. First arguing, then standing, then shouting, then violence. Sounds like some of our church staff meetings. Just kidding.

The Roman tribune once again intervenes to forcibly remove Paul from the melee before he is torn to pieces, taking him back to the Roman barracks.

Put yourself in Paul's sandals. What would you be thinking? How would you be feeling?

You have repeatedly shared about Jesus in Jerusalem. Nobody is listening. Nobody is open. Nobody is interested. Nobody is persuaded.

The clout you thought you might have with your Jewish brethren in Jerusalem and on the Council amounts to zero. Converts are zero. Prospects are zero. You feel like a zero.

There's been nothing but trouble. You have been grossly misunderstood, falsely accused, dragged from the temple, nearly flogged, illegally punched, and almost killed more than once.

And in the middle of it all, you lost your cool.

You are now in custody. In confusion. In despair. And in the dark about what happens next.

Can you imagine it?

Probably so. Because you have probably been there.

Not in a Roman barracks in Jerusalem. But in a place of low ebb. In a place of bleary bewilderment. In a place where you've been trying to live faithfully for God, and trouble just keeps coming in waves, knocking you down. And you're not sure you can get back up.

Paul has a night and a day to stew about it all.

Then something happens that changes everything. Everything but the circumstances. □ Verse 11 explains it.

ESV Acts 23:11 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."

When Paul needs it the most, the Lord does two things reflected in this verse.

First, □ "the Lord stood by him." I take it that the Lord somehow became visible to Paul, either in a vision or in person. The Lord shows himself to Paul in this moment to encourage him. The Lord says, □ "take courage."

For a friend to show up to stand by you and say, "take courage" is helpful. For the Lord Jesus to do it is life-changing.

But let's think about this encounter for a moment. The Lord is merely making visible something that is always real, even though it is normally unseen. Namely, the Lord is standing by you and me. Jesus is always with those who are his, whether we see him or not. The only thing

unusual about the Lord's presence with Paul is that Paul can temporarily see it with his eyes.

After Jesus was resurrected and just before he ascended to heaven where he would no longer be visible, Jesus said to his disciples in □ Matthew 28:20,

ESV Matthew 28:20 “. . . And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

It is interesting that Jesus says, “behold,” encouraging them to keep seeing something unseen: that “I am with you always.” You may not see him. You may not sense his presence. In fact, you may feel completely alone or even abandoned. But Jesus's appearance to Paul is his reminder to us: “I am with you always.”

As good as that is, there is more. There is a second thing. Not only is the Lord standing by Paul, he is also working in him. Notice what the Lord says in the last part of □ Acts 23:11.

ESV Acts 23:11 “. . . as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”

The Lord is working in and through Paul to take him to Rome, where he will testify, just as he has testified in Jerusalem to the facts about Jesus. Implicit in this statement is a commendation for what Paul has done in Jerusalem.

As we discussed last week, if we define success according to results alone, what Paul did in Jerusalem was a miserable failure. But the Lord is so pleased with and so proud of Paul's testimony that he is arranging a trip to Rome, the hub of the Roman Empire, the most influential place on earth at the time, to share his testimony there also.

In essence, the Lord is saying to Paul, “Good work in Jerusalem. Well done. Now, let’s go to Rome to do some more good work there.”

For months it had been on Paul’s heart to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome (Acts 19:21). He had made it to Jerusalem, but given the dumpster fire that ignited there, it looked like he was stuck and might never make it to Rome.

But the Lord assures Paul that he has been at work in him all along, and that he will continue to work in him to bring him to Rome, in fulfillment of Paul’s dream and God’s purposes.

Later, while in Rome, Paul will write a letter to the Philippians affirming this truth for all believers. In □ Philippians 1:6, he says,

NLT Philippians 1:6 And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

God is always at work in the lives of his children. This is a pivotal truth because there are times in life when things seem to be going so badly, when circumstances are so burdensome, when outcomes are so disappointing that we are tempted to conclude that God could not possibly be in it.

If I had a nickel for every time I have thought or heard some variation of the question, “What good purpose could this possibly serve?” we could build out the unfinished part of our building.

When we become convinced that our suffering is meaningless, then it becomes unbearable.

But when we realize that our suffering has meaning, that God is still at work in us and through us, redeeming our suffering for his good purposes and our ultimate well-being, then, not only is it bearable, but we can praise God in the middle of it, even when we don't know for sure what he is up to.

Here is the big idea I draw from this: □ The Lord is standing by you and working in you.

It is a simple idea reflected in our text and summed up in verse 11. The Lord is standing by you and working in you.

In one of Paul's darkest hours, he needed to be reminded of this truth. And so do I.

The last month has been one of the most difficult in my life. Some of you know that I have been thrust into the role of full-time caregiver for my parents. My 94-year-old father has dementia. My 85-year-old mother had been his primary caregiver until she fell recently and broke her ankle, requiring reconstructive surgery with a plate and screws. Now, while Mom heals, both can do little or nothing for themselves.

Even before my mother's fall, Cathy and I had been evaluating better living arrangements for my parents, including hiring a lawyer who specializes in elder law to help us qualify dad for a Medicaid program that can provide the memory care he needs, which would otherwise be unaffordable. But that process is lengthy and complicated and probably six weeks away from being completed.

So, for the time being, I have two full-time jobs, basically working four twelves at the church and three twelves as caregiver. And Cathy is left to take up the home chores I have abandoned, while putting out fires at her own work at ASU.

Cathy and I are bleary and at times catatonic but doing remarkably okay given the difficult season. Ironically, Sundays are a breather for me now. We are hanging on by faith until Mom's ankle heals and longer-term care options come into focus.

Last Friday was a low point. Showering my dad is always a stressful adventure for me because he is weak and unsteady. But on Friday, there was something new.

As I was leading him out of the shower, he froze and would not move. I came alongside him in the shower to support and direct him, and he panicked, falling back on me, going limp in my arms, and crying out like a troubled toddler. So, there I was, holding up 180 pounds of dead weight, trying to hide my own panic to calm and coach him. Somehow, I was able to drag him out of the shower and onto a chair and called for outside help in getting him dressed and transferred to his recliner. All the while, mom sat helplessly in her recliner with her broken ankle elevated.

Things seemed to stabilize. But later that evening, another new thing happened. I had brushed his teeth and was finishing his shave when I asked a question I had been wondering about but hadn't had the courage to ask.

As I splashed some Old Spice after shave on his face, I asked, "Dad, do you know that I am your son, Bob?"

He gave me a look of disbelief, as if I were an imposter. He said, "No." For the first time, I realized Dad has no idea who I am.

I held it together long enough to coach Dad back into his chair and to give him his eye drops. Then I went back into the bedroom, where I have my make-shift workstation set up. And I wept.

A little later, that nickel question arose in me, “What good purpose could this possibly serve?”

Then, I realized that I needed the reminder from our text, and maybe you do, too: The Lord is standing by you and working in you.

And that changes everything. Everything but the circumstances.

Let’s pray. Lord, in the dark nights of our souls, help us to remember and to be encouraged and thankful that you are standing by us and working in us. Amen.