

Paul in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin

Text: Acts 23:1-11

From this point onward, Paul stays under arrest until his death. He is in Jerusalem and the trials there are numerous. In this dangerous time in Paul's life, we see Paul is a man with a good conscience, with a presence of mind, and with an answer from the Lord. He is now standing before the Sanhedrin for the final time:

1. A MAN WITH A GOOD CONSCIENCE

Acts 23:1, 2: "And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth."

What does it mean to have a good conscience? A good conscience is having the absence of guilt because you know you have done what is right and have avoided doing what is wrong. A good conscience is given to the obedient Christian. I Peter 3:21: "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Hebrews 13:18: "Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly." Peter said in I Peter 3:16, "Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ." Examine the surrounding verses: I Peter 3:10-17. Here we observe that if we love the life that we are living and consistently do those things in life that we Christians should do, we shall most definitely have a good conscience. And this good conscience will carry us through, even if we suffer for maintaining it.

The love of God and sincere faith travel with the good conscience. The absence of love and sincerity will lead to a life that is shipwrecked (I Timothy 1:5, 19). The one who sins has a choice to agree and be accused or to deny and make excuse. Romans 2:15: "Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another." When refusal to clear one's conscience is ignored, a most serious thing happens. The conscience can become seared. I Timothy 4:2: "Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron."

Ephesians 4:19: "Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness." A most interesting book I read some years ago is entitled, *The Gift of Pain* by Dr. Paul Brand. Dr. Brand probes the mystery of pain and reveals its importance. As an indicator that lets us know something is wrong, pain has a value that becomes clearest in its absence. Indeed, pain is a gift that none of us want and yet none of us can do without. Guilt for sin committed pricks and gives great discomfort to our conscience. This is given to bring us to sincere repentance. The Lord Jesus mentioned the "pricks" which are likened to a goad, a sharp instrument to give enough pain to encourage the animal to stop, to go, or to turn in a certain direction. Acts 9:5: "And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." To ignore the convicting goads of God's love is to develop a seared conscience that has lost the ability to feel the conviction or guilt. It is a dangerous thing to ignore conviction!

Years ago, Dr. Tom Malone said, “If you preach with the power of the Holy Spirit you either bring people to conviction or they get angry.” And that seems to be the apparent response in the next verse. Acts 23:2: “And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth.” A similar situation happened to Jesus in the unlawful trials leading to the crucifixion event. After Christ was struck, John 18:23 records, “Jesus answered him, If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?”

2. A MAN WITH A PRESENCE OF MIND

Acts 23:3-5. The phrase, “presence of mind” is an idiomatic expression, which means a calm state of mind that allows one to think clearly or act effectively in a difficult situation. It is the ability to act sensibly, promptly, and appropriately, especially in an emergency. Although Paul was unlawfully struck, when told that he had just rebuked a man considered to be a ruler of the people, he quickly recalled the Scriptures that forbids the cursing of the ruler found in Exodus 22:28 and backed off.

Rudyard Kipling, in his famous poem, *If*, tells his son the qualities of a man. Here are a few of his summations: “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, or being lied about, don’t deal in lies, or being hated, don’t give way to hating, If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools, or watch the things you gave your life to, broken, and stoop and build ’em up with worn-out tools: If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch, Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it, and—which is more—you’ll be a man, my son!

Paul did not lose control. He practiced what he preached. Galatians 5:22, 23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.”

3. A MAN WITH AN ANSWER FROM THE LORD

Acts 23:6-10. Proverbs 16:9: “A man’s heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps.” Proverbs 3:6: “In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” Proverbs 16:1: “The preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, is from the Lord.”

Paul was very familiar with the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees believed in the doctrine of the physical resurrection of the body (as did he), the Sadducees did not. Paul wisely used their disagreement to move the focus of their murderous plans to divert them momentarily from him to each other.

Jesus prophesied in Mark 13:9-11, “But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them. And the gospel must first be published among all nations. But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost.” Although this is prophecy of coming events, the principle is true. God will give you the answers when you need them.

Conclusion:

Acts 23:11: "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." This is the hope given to Paul by divine revelation. There was a gang of men who were so determined to kill Saul that they banded together agreeing to not eat or drink until Paul was captured and killed. Later he came before Felix, then Festus, and then finally Agrippa. I believe it was the words of Acts 23:11 that kept Paul's faith strong. No matter how bad things would get, God assured him that he would get to Rome. Earlier Paul's heart desire was revealed in Acts 19:21: "After these things were ended, Paul purposed in the spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome." And Rome he shall see.

-Pastor Pope-