

There are lots of hot button issues today. Some of the most talked about, written about, tweeted about, and debated include ISIS and radical Islamic terrorism, the threat of Ebola, and the upcoming mid-term elections. Those issues are worthy of attention. Those issues *should* be discussed and addressed in meaningful ways. Those issues – and how we deal with them – will greatly impact our lives in one way or another.

But as important as *those* issues are, there are *some* concerns of even *greater* importance – at least in the eyes of the hardened Jewish leadership Council, the passionate Apostle Paul, and a bewildered Roman commander as they met together in Jerusalem in AD 57. And although we usually assume *modern* concerns are far more important than *ancient* ones, I'd suggest that what concerned them back *then* is actually of greater importance than what concerns *most* folks *today*. That's because what concerned them impacted not only life as they knew it, but their eternal destiny as well. And that same issue impacts us in the same way.

What was that issue? What *is* that issue?

[Turn to Acts 22]

You may recall that Paul was beaten by a mob of angry Jews in the Temple because they charged him (21:28) with speaking against God's people, God's Law, and God's Temple, as well defiling the Temple by bringing a Gentile into a restricted area (a charge that was false).

Paul was in essence rescued by the Roman commander who arrived on the scene with his troops. The boisterous mob prevented the commander from getting to the cause of the trouble, so he brought Paul back to the barracks – followed by the angry mob.

The commander, probably hoping ease the tension, grants Paul's request to address the mob. Paul shared his personal testimony – his encounter with the risen Jesus – and how it changed his life resulted in his mission to bring the good news of salvation to Gentiles.

Last week saw the crowd's reaction to Paul testimony and mission to the Gentiles:

Read vs.21,22

*** ²¹ "And He said to me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" ²² They listened to him up to this statement, and *then***

they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!"

And as we learn now, their actions were consistent with their words:

Read v.23

*** ²³ And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air,**

The exact significance of their actions of **throwing off their cloaks** (their outer robes) **and tossing dust into the air** are understood in various ways. **Throwing off their cloaks** may be symbolic of their desire to stone Paul, since the removing of their robes preceded such action. Or, it may mean that in the absence of stones in the Temple courtyard, they showed their anger at Paul by tossing their garments and dust at Paul. Or, they may've been shaking the dust off their garments (similar to the practice of shaking the dust off one's feet), to show they were rejecting Him as one who was under God's judgment. But whatever its *exact* significance, it expressed their anger *at* and rejection *of* Paul and his words.

The Roman commander realized that allowing Paul to speak didn't solve his problem: he *still* didn't know the cause of the trouble, *and* the crowd was even angrier! So, he resorted to a different tactic to get the bottom of all this:

Read v.24

*** ²⁴ the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way.**

He decides Paul should be **examined by scourging** (a polite way a saying he'd brutally torture the truth out of Paul). The commander learned through experience that there's nothing like a good scourging to cut through nonsense.

Scourging was brutal – and sometimes lethal. * It involved being beaten with a whip-like instrument – consisting of leather thongs (strips) attached to a wooden handle. Embedded in the leather thongs were sharp pieces of bone or metal which would rip through the flesh of those repeatedly stuck by a musclebound soldier who probably enjoyed doing this more than he should have. The soldiers were preparing to give Paul the same kind of scourging their predecessors had given to Jesus.

Read v.25

*²⁵ **But when they stretched him out with thongs** [getter be rendered *for thongs* (ESV= *for the whips*)...not secured with thongs, but in preparation for being struck with them], **Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?"**

Paul was likely taken to the courtyard in fortress, where he was prepped for **scourging**. Paul thought it was a good time to ask the soldier securing him and “informational” question: “*By the way, Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?*”

Read v.26

*²⁶ **When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and told him, saying, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman."**

I wouldn't be surprised if the centurion's heart skipped beat before it started racing. When he realizes Paul is claiming to be a Roman citizen, he rushes to his commander, **saying, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman."**

Read v.27

*²⁷ **The commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" And he said, "Yes."**

Paul's status as a Roman citizen changed everything. Although the commander knew Paul was a citizen of Tarsus, he did *not* know that Paul was a Roman citizen. As a Roman citizen, Paul enjoyed rights and privileges, including the right *not* to be tortured for information or to be imprisoned and punished without being charged, tried, and convicted. And as of yet, he hadn't even been charged, let alone tried and convicted.

Read v.28

*²⁸ **The commander answered, "I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money." And Paul said, "But I was actually born a citizen."**

The commander identifies himself as a Roman citizen – telling Paul he acquired his citizenship through a bribe (“**with a large sum of money**”). An official who knew him, for a **large sum of money**, added his name to a list of those to be approved by Emperor Claudius for citizenship. Later in Acts (23:26) we'll learn that the commander's name was *Claudius Lysias*,

making it likely that *Lysius* added the name *Claudius* in honor of Emperor Claudius who granted him that status.

But in a sense Paul “one-upped” him, telling him that he **was actually born a citizen**, which suggests Paul's father in some way ingratiated himself to Roman authorities who granted him that honor. Paul was a citizen from birth.

Read v.29

*²⁹ **Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains.**

Paul's revelation of his citizenship brought things to a screeching halt. Anyone responsible for mistreating a Roman citizen would themselves be subject to punishment. And Paul had already been mistreated in that he was **put in chains** without being charged.

Read v.30

*³⁰ **But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them.**

The commander, responsible for upholding the peace in Jerusalem, knows that until he gets to the bottom of this matter, chaos will continue. Keep in mind that the commander probably doesn't know Hebrew or Aramaic, so he's missed much of what happened in the courtyard and during Paul's speech. Even if he had a translator present, in all the commotion, things would have been missed.

So he resorts to another tactic: bringing Paul before the Jewish Council, consisting of the High Priest, plus 70 leading Jewish elders. The commander sees this as part of his fact-finding due diligence. The Roman procurator would be the one to try Paul.

The Council was interested in meeting as well because they saw it was an opportunity to get rid of Paul as they'd gotten rid of Jesus. And if they couldn't do it themselves (as with Stephen), they'd be happy to let the Romans do it (as with Jesus).

So in one room are gathered the hardened Jewish council, the passionate Apostle Paul, and a bewildered Roman commander. Whether they

realize it or not, they are about to deal with life's most important issue – one with temporal *and* eternal consequences. And it's an issue with those same consequences for us. It concerns the plan of God – and the hope of the world.

As Paul was brought before the council, they *thought* they were rejecting Paul because Paul was defying the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and violating His divine plan. But in reality, the Jewish leaders were the ones defying God and violating His plan. In reality, the Council was rejecting Paul because they were rejecting the God of their forefathers – and His plan which had unfolded before their very eyes.

They were rejecting God for the same reason *we* fail to pick up the phone when our caller id identifies the call as coming from some 1-800 number in Orlando FL: *because they really don't know who He is!*

So what happened at this meeting of the Council, the apostle, and the commander?

Read 23:1

* ^{23:1} **Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day."**

Paul looks intently at the Council members – perhaps suggesting he was looking with an awareness of how they were feeling and thinking. The same word translated **looking intently** here, was used in Acts 13:9, of Paul looking at a false prophet named Elymus who opposed Paul.

Read 13:9

* ⁹ **But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze [same word as "looking intently" in 23:1] on him,¹⁰ and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?"**

I wonder if the Holy Spirit gave Paul similar insight into the hearts of these Council members.

Paul address his fellow Jews as **brothers** – fellow descendants of Abraham. I wonder if, by *not* referring to them as "fathers" (out of respect for their roles), Paul is intentionally addressing them as a peer, not as one who bows to their authority.

The first thing he says is, "**Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience**

before God up to this day." And I don't think Paul expected those words to be well received, since just *everything* Paul said and did since he met Jesus was wrong in the eyes of the men he was addressing! That's why the day before he'd been accused of blasphemy!

As one might expect, the High Priest was incensed that Paul suggested he could have a clear conscience:

Read v.2

* ² **The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth.**

Ananias, the High Priest (from AD 47-AD 58/59), was offended by Paul's statement and **commanded those standing beside Paul to strike him on the mouth.** Historical records portray Ananias as volatile, dishonest, accepting of bribes, and not above taking money from tithes reserved for other priests. He was more interested in pleasing himself and Rome more than in pleasing God.

Read v.3

* ³ **Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?"**

Perhaps referring to a similar analogy in Ezekiel 13, where Ezekiel likens the ministry of false prophets to putting a flimsy coating of white plaster on the decaying wall that is God's people. It looks nice, but it's destined for ruin. Paul minces no words and tells the High Priest that he's like a whitewashed, decaying wall, and God will strike him (...which He did in AD 66)! A reason Paul gives is his hypocrisy: while supposedly evaluating Paul according the Law, by having Paul struck, *he* was violating the Law! Paul probably has in mind...

Read Leviticus 19:15

* ¹⁵ **'You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly.**

The High Priest's action is unjust since Paul hadn't been formally confronted, charged, tried, or found guilty of anything.

Others present reprimanded Paul:

Read v.4

* ⁴ **But the bystanders said, "Do you revile God's high priest?"**

The High Priest was the closest person to a ruler of the Jews at this time in her history – and the Law said:

Read Exodus 22:28

* ²⁸ **"You shall not curse God, nor curse a ruler of your people.**

How did Paul respond?

Read v.5

* ⁵ **And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.'"**

There are differences of opinion regarding what just happened and what Paul is saying here:

1. Perhaps Paul *didn't know* he was speaking to the High Priest (because he hadn't met him before, or because the High Priest he wasn't formally attired, or because Paul's vision was poor...). If so, Paul may be apologizing for his lack of respect, even quoting Exodus 27:28.
2. Perhaps Paul is speaking *ironically* – even *sarcastically*. He may be saying that he didn't realize that such a ruthless, brutal, compromising man could be a High Priest! Then he quotes Scripture to show his respect for the office, but not for the man.

Either is possible (and variations in between), and I'm not sure which it is. (If Paul was from New Jersey, I might lean most heavily toward the last interpretation, but...).

Be that as it may, Paul realized a fair trial was beyond a possibility. He may have thought that if the Council was of one mind, the commander might turn Paul over to them for a religious trial that would end of his ministry – even his life. But Paul still had Rome on his heart and mind. He felt that he had more to do for His Lord – that his God-given mission was not yet complete.

So Paul engages in a little “divide and conquer.” Knowing the mindset of both the Sadducees and Pharisees on the council, Paul raises a central aspect of the Gospel:

Read v.6

* ⁶ **But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on**

trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!"

The issue he highlighted was the *resurrection* – as clearly evident in the life of Jesus. The hope of Christianity – the hope of *everyone* – is tied to Christ's death *and resurrection*. It was at the heart of Paul's preaching: God's Son, the Messiah, died for our sins, and 3 days later, demonstrated His victory over sin and death by rising from the grave. His resurrection is proof and vindication that He is God's Anointed. And during Paul's testimony the day before, his emphasis was on his encounters with the risen Jesus. Paul sees himself on trial for proclaiming the resurrection of God's Son, their Messiah. That was clear by their response to his testimony the day before.

There were many differences between Sadducees and Pharisees, none more significant than their beliefs regarding resurrection. While Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection, Pharisees did.

As Paul said this, the eyes of the council moved from being on Paul, to each other:

Read vs.7,8

* ⁷ **As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.**

The naturalistic bent of the Sadducees stands in contrast to the *super*-naturalistic bent of the Pharisees. Luke tells us **the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit**. Sadducees believed there was no real hope of future resurrection – the best they could imagine was some sort of shadowy existence in the netherworld. But there's uncertainty as to what Luke meant is meant by the Sadducees saying there is there is **no...angel, nor a spirit**.

Does it mean they totally rejected the existence of angels and spirits? Does it mean they rejected excessive speculation about them? Or, in light of their denial of resurrection, are they denying that people returned from the dead in the form of spirit beings? In any case, it gives insight into why they'd reject not only Jesus' resurrection, but that the spirit of Jesus ever

appeared to Paul and spoke to him. They had trouble believing in supernatural intervention.

Read v.9

***⁹ And there occurred a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and *began* to argue heatedly, saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"**

The Pharisees believed in resurrection, *and* in angels and spirits – and considered Paul just might be telling the truth. Instead of the council being unified against Paul, they were fighting each other – and Paul and the commander had front row seats.

Read v.10

***¹⁰ And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.**

The day before, the commander was ready to brutally torture the truth out of Paul, *and now* he fears for Paul's safety and used his forces to usher Paul to the safety of the barracks.

What was going through Paul's mind when he got back to the barracks? As Agabus prophesied (21:11), Paul was in Gentile custody. What would happen next? Would the fears of those who told Paul not to go to Jerusalem be realized? Had Paul made a mistake to going to Jerusalem after all?

In light of what happens next, it seems Paul may have been having some doubts himself:

Read v.11

***¹¹ But on the night *immediately* following, the Lord [probably a reference to Jesus] stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must [δέει, used frequently Acts and Luke's gospel to point to divine necessity] witness at Rome also."**

As Luke told us earlier during Paul's recently completed third missionary journey, Paul longed to bring the gospel go to Rome and beyond:

Read 19:21

***²¹ ...Paul purposed in the spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."**

What was the impact of the appearance and words of Jesus?

1. It put His stamp of approval on Paul's ministry thus far. Jesus affirmed that even though Paul had seemingly nothing but trouble to show for his efforts in Jerusalem these past two days, he was successful in the eyes of Jesus for having **solemnly witnessed to...** His divine **cause**.

That's encouraging for us as well. When we solemnly testify to the reality concerning Jesus – when we hold Him up as the hope of this world – we can meet with the approval of our Master *even if* we don't see the fruit we are looking for.

2. It encouraged Paul to press on. The fact that Paul is told to **take courage** suggests his courage was waning. But Jesus' words bolstered his courage, affirming that his mission was not over, and his dream of going to Rome would become reality – no matter how distant it might seem at that moment. God is in control –and God would protect Paul until his work was done.

That's encouraging for us as well, isn't! God will protect us too until our work is done. Paul was reminded of that here –and earlier he'd reminded the believers in Thessalonica similarly:

Read II Thessalonians 3:1-3

***¹ Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as *it did* also with you; ² and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. ³ But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil *one*.**