

Paul's Defence Before the Council

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, October 26, 2025. My name is Kent Dixon. It's my joy to be the pastor here. Well, this morning, we're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World.

And we're continuing to dig into the history of the early church together. See what we can learn from the people, the places, the events that we read about there. So over the past few weeks, we've been considering how an angry mob wanted the Apostle Paul arrested and killed.

We've also looked at how a Roman commander gave Paul an opportunity to defend himself before that mob. And then this same Roman commander seemed to be sincerely seeking the truth about Paul.

Who he was, the content of his message, and his mission. And as we also have recognized, it wasn't long before the mob really escalated in their anger again towards Paul.

They pushed for him to be killed. Last week, we recognized Paul's dual citizenship. Hopefully you remember that. Both as a man who was born as a citizen of Rome, and also someone whose ultimate citizenship is in heaven.

[1 : 15] We recognized that everyone who declares Jesus as the Lord of their life also has that special kind of dual citizenship. Both of this world, our city, our country, and as citizens of heaven.

As we explored the events last week, we were reminded that this particular Roman commander was in charge of the troops at the Antonia Fortress. These soldiers were responsible for, we've talked about this before, protecting and guarding the temple in Jerusalem.

This was their main task and their main focus. And it was really in the best interest of the Roman authorities to maintain peace among their Jewish subjects.

So they wanted to protect the temple with the focus of doing that. We also have recognized that their preference, their priority, was to stay out of Jewish affairs.

We've talked about that. There were times, though, and this is one of them, when that simply could not be avoided. This was one of those times.

[2 : 24] In his quest to determine why Paul was so clearly hated by his fellow Jews, the commander used his influence to convene the Jewish ruling council, who were known as the Sanhedrin.

The Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. So the commander called for them to be convened to weigh in on what was going on here.

So we're going to take a little closer look at these events together this morning, and we're going to see how Paul's appearance before this council quickly devolved into quite a mess.

And while Paul's defense before the council didn't really, in the end, help the Roman commander much, several things that are mentioned in this passage that we'll study this morning that are helpful to us as Christians today.

Our passage for this morning is found in Acts 23, verses 1 to 10. So if you have your Bible with you, please turn there or grab a Bible from the pew in front of you.

[3 : 30] I'll give you a sec. Acts 23, verses 1 to 10. And you can hold that passage open because we'll be coming back to it.

Acts 23, 1 to 10. Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.

At this, the high priest, Ananias, ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, God will strike you, you whitewashed wall.

You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck. Those who were standing near Paul said, How dare you insult God's high priest?

Paul replied, Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest, for it is written, Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people. Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, My brothers, I am a Pharisee descended from Pharisees. [4 : 43] I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead. When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.

The Sadducees say there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe in all these things. There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law, who were Pharisees, stood up and argued vigorously.

We find nothing wrong with this man, they said. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him? The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks. Our sermon this morning is titled, Paul's Defense Before the Council, and we're going to explore these events surrounding Paul's appearance before the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin.

So Paul appears before the Sanhedrin, and as he addresses them, we see it again. Paul is respectful, right? Right away.

[5 : 57] He also boldly declares that he has a clear conscience before God for everything that he has done. And then immediately we see that the high priest Ananias is angry, and angry is an understatement.

I would say he's furious. He orders the people standing around Paul to hit him in the face, to hit him in the mouth. It's not a very reciprocal show of respect there, is it?

But then rather than de-escalating things, which he could have done, Paul strikes right back with his words. So just as Jesus had called the Jewish leaders hypocrites and whitewashed tombs, Paul does the same.

Not only does he strike back with his words, he recognizes that Ananias was the one who had ordered that he be struck. And he directs, primarily directs, his criticism at Ananias, right at him. So aside from the struck on the mouth part, I don't know about you, if you've ever been hit in the face by someone, I don't generally have a positive reaction. Doesn't happen often, I'll say. But why did Paul react so strongly here?

[7 : 10] Well, first of all, we can recognize that Paul's outburst came because this was an illegal command that the high priest Ananias had given. And as an aside, little historical context, Josephus, a respected first century historian, described this man, Ananias, as profane, greedy, and hot-tempered.

Not a great representative for God, maybe, right? Not the best candidate for high priest. But friends, how often are we maybe not the best representatives for God, either with our own words or actions?

If someone has to wonder if you are a Christian, that's maybe not the best witness for God, then, is it?

Have you ever expressed to someone that you were a Christian, and they said, oh, that's a surprise. That's not a great feeling, right? Or, conversely, have you ever had somebody find out that you're a Christian, a follower of Jesus, and they said, of course.

That makes sense. So, back to Paul. As I said in our sermon last week, Paul knew the rules well. He wasn't afraid to point out to anyone when they were out of line.

[8 : 35] And having studied under an esteemed teacher like Gamaliel, we've talked about him before, Paul would have likely had some status in religious circles, right?

The status of your rabbi would reflect on you. So, even though Paul had defected, that's probably the best way to describe it, he had defected to the following, following the teachings of Jesus, spreading the gospel, his reputation probably would have still carried some weight.

It would have been no small thing then for Paul to have verbally attacked the high priest the way he did. But we realize then, right away, that Paul didn't recognize that's who he was speaking to.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I think about that, I think, isn't it the guy with the big, tall, funny hat and a bunch of other guys standing around him? Wouldn't that be obvious that that was the high priest? Well, maybe.

But Ananias, it's really important to recognize he had violated Jewish law in lots of ways here. He had assumed Paul was guilty. He didn't give him a trial.

[9 : 44] He didn't offer him a trial. And then immediately, he told other people to attack him, to give him some sort of punishment. So this may probably help us to recognize that Paul didn't connect the dots here, right?

This command that Ananias had given for him to be struck broke one of the laws that he was pledged to protect as high priest. But then we see it here again immediately.

When it's pointed out to Paul that he has insulted the high priest, he immediately responds that he did not know. As we considered last week, Paul also notes the view of paying respect to those in authority.

And so that's what he immediately returns to. Next, we recognize that seeing both the Pharisees and Sadducees present at this gathering, I think Paul sees a strategic opportunity here because he immediately identifies himself as a Pharisee, right?

He intentionally or unintentionally, I think it's the former, aligns himself with one of these two groups. So Paul demonstrates the importance of relating to people on their own terms.

[11 : 04] We've talked about how he does that. Also using our identity and background, not for status or recognition, but as a means of gaining credibility when we want to share God's truth, right?

If someone doesn't know you and you explain who you are a little bit, give them some context, it can help you in sharing the gospel. Paul says, my brothers, I am a Pharisee descended from Pharisees, right?

So he's not saying, I became a Pharisee last week. I think I'm getting the hang of it. No, he says, I am essentially a generational Pharisee.

That's a big deal. He's establishing his connection with part of this audience. And then also, for all the Sadducees, he's letting them know who he is as well.

So just by stating that he is a Pharisee, the Sadducees would also get, oh, he believes this and that and these other things, right? Right away, they know who he is and what he's about.

[12 : 09] And then Paul says, I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead. Very clear statement there. And so the Pharisees and Sadducees, maybe you know, maybe you don't, the distinctions, they were two distinct groups of Jewish leaders and their beliefs who were really strikingly different.

See, the Pharisees believed very strongly in a bodily resurrection. Right? So they got that. But the Sadducees really did not. Maybe you've heard that that's why the Sadducees were so sad.

You see? It's a very old Sunday school joke, sir. I didn't get it at the time, so it took like, I don't know, 50 years to pick it up.

Not that smart. So the Sadducees strictly adhered to the teachings of Genesis through Deuteronomy. So that's known as the Jewish Pentateuch. Five books.

And those five books do not, go ahead and look, do not contain any explicit teaching about resurrection. Right? So if that was their core teaching, that was their core scripture, it ain't in there.

[13 : 25] Right? So you can understand why maybe they didn't relate to it. So then again, Paul is very strategic in raising the fact that he is actually in trouble for believing in resurrection.

Right? He's saying, this is why I'm in trouble. Get it? All of those of you who are with me and all of those of you who are not. So he throws out this little factual hand grenade, ting, hook, into a room of religious scholars that have very conflicting views.

So by doing this, he's essentially and effectively taking the attention and debate off of himself and putting it back to a conflicted council.

Pretty wise, I think. So as soon as Paul focuses that attention back on the concept of bodily resurrection, we read in our passage this morning that a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Right? No surprise. And the assembly was divided. So then we recognize that not only did the Pharisees vocally defend Paul and essentially take his side, whether because of their common beliefs or their background, whatever it was, or maybe just to get under the Sadducees' skin.

[14 : 52] You see that being a possibility? Maybe a bit of both. So then they rubbed their opponents' noses in it even more by saying, did you catch this, that Paul maybe had even gotten a message from a spirit or angel.

Did you catch that? So remember, the Sadducees believed in neither spirits nor angels. So there's a bit of a dagger in a little bit more, I think, there.

So talk about throwing gasoline on a fire. The dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, we read, became so intense that the Roman commander, remember him, he pops back into the story, ordered his troops to go and rescue Paul and bring him back to the barracks.

Right? That seems to be their MO. They rescue Paul and bring him back to the barracks and then they rescue Paul and bring him back to the barracks again. So let's take some time to see what we can learn from this really intense event.

What can we learn first from Paul's conscience? Well, it's clear that as we heard in the beginning of the passage, Paul says he had a clear conscience about his past.

[16:09] Remember Paul's past? It was never lost on Paul how sinful and misguided he had been. And then also how grateful he was that God had redeemed and rescued him.

And then also called him to serve him. We can also see through Paul's life that seeking to keep his conscience clear before God was something that Paul made a priority.

I think really for us we can keep a clear conscience or seek to keep a clear conscience by staying closely connected to God in prayer.

Asking him to reveal the things that we need to confess. Do you do that? Are you able to do that? Are you able to have the light shone in the uncomfortable corners?

sinner? But we can see this in Paul even though he had personally and viciously persecuted Christians before his conversion. Paul recognizes and accepts God's forgiveness.

[17:15] He's not stuck in the past of who he was. He's grateful for who God has made him now. So friends don't hang on the lies of this world and our enemy.

Those lies I don't know if you've heard them or you hear them in your life. They tell you that you're unforgivable unlovable not worthy not not valuable they are lies.

Do not believe the lies about yourself or others. instead confess some of the things that you have done. Confess that those things may have gone against God's plan for you.

And then get ready to receive the forgiveness the acceptance and the love that are freely yours. We also need to recognize that living our lives solely seeking to follow our conscience think that's a good idea?

It's like living by emotion, right? I'm happy today. I'm sad today. Emotions are fleeting and fluctuate. One nugget I recently read said your conscience is like a clock.

[18:43] It is correct only if properly set. I thought that was so great. If your conscience is misaligned or misinformed, it can and will mislead you over and over.

It's critical that we properly inform our conscience, not with our own ideas or opinions or feelings or those of others even, but with the truth of God's word.

As Psalm 119, 104, and 105 says, I gain understanding from your precepts. Therefore, I hate every wrong path.

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. So you know that I'm Scottish and Irish. Do I have a temper?

It rarely comes out, and fortunately when it comes out, it is usually related to injustice. When the command is given for Paul to be struck in the mouth, Paul is quick to call out that behavior as unlawful, and he strongly and immediately rebukes the man who gave the order.

[20:02] Paul never minces words, right? Calls him a hypocrite, publicly declares that he is violating Jewish law, period.

And as we've already considered, Paul didn't know or recognize that the person who gave the order was the high priest. But I have to wonder if Paul's words there were maybe somewhat prophetic. Because as we've recognized, Josephus, the historian, depicted Ananias as one of the very worst of the high priests. That's dubious honor.

He was a man who was known for his pro-Roman sentiments, his extreme cruelty, and his greed. Scholars note that ten years after the events that we've been considering this morning, Ananias came to an untimely end at the hands of, guess who, Jewish freedom fighters.

But we've also noted, though, that as soon as Paul was informed of Ananias' identity as high priest, Paul was quick to apologize. Last week, we talked about paying respect to those in authority over us, and this is really what Paul was focusing on here.

[21:24] The law taught that people shouldn't speak badly of a ruler, not even an inch. Come on. Ruler. Inch. That was a lot of work to come up with that one.

The New Testament, though, also makes it clear that we must show respect. Absolutely. That's a consistent theme in Scripture that we see over and over and over and over and over.

So maybe this all makes sense that Paul's outburst is difficult to justify. Is it okay to lose our temper? So let's consider two possibilities quickly there.

Maybe he just, that's it, lost his temper. Would you lose your temper, as I said before, if you got hit in the mouth by someone? Maybe. But to be fair, he's also very quick to get it under control.

So if you have a bad temper and the beast is unleashed, can you get it back under control or not before incarceration? So another option, maybe he was moved by the spirit with righteous indignation.

[22 : 36] Right? maybe this was a justified reaction prompted by the spirit, the Holy Spirit. Maybe the Holy Spirit prompted Paul to pronounce this judgment on this hypocritical religious leader.

So regardless of which view is more correct, we can learn from Paul's teaching in 2 Timothy 2, 24 to 26. I think we, yeah, we did talk about this passage a few weeks ago.

Do you hear everyone? Able to teach, not resentful.

Opponents must be gently instructed in the hope that God will grant them the repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth and that they will come to their senses and escape, hear this, from the trap of the devil.

That's who's behind a lot of these reactions. who has taken them captive to do his will. So when you are out of control, consider who may have control over you.

[23 : 45] So what about Paul's hope? Paul was a hopeful, hopeful man. He believed in and held hope in Jesus himself and in the future that waits for everyone who believes in Jesus.

Jesus. That's a theme of Paul's writing as well. A strong belief in the resurrection of the dead formed the foundation of Paul's beliefs and his teaching.

Paul spoke of the hope that we have in resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus being a connection to our own resurrection. Acts 24, 14, and 15 says, I believe everything that is in accordance with the law and that is written in the prophets and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

Hope, resurrection. Acts 26, verses 6 to 8 says, And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today.

This is the promise of our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, Paul says, It is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me.

[25 : 08] Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? Hope, resurrection. Do you hear that connection there over and over?

Paul connected often the resurrection of the dead to our personal hope. Makes sense, right? I don't know that we often connect those things.

Hopefully we do. Because if bodily resurrection is both possible and factual, then the promise of resurrection is then a reality for anyone who believes in and follows Jesus.

Does that excite you? there's no resurrection hope for you and me without Jesus. Paul says in Romans 8, 23 to 25, a few chunks of scripture here, not only so, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

for in this hope we were saved. But hope is that is seen as no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?

[26 : 24] But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. Paul wrote that the redemption of our body is directly connected to our salvation.

And in fact, it is the hope for which we are saved. 1 Corinthians 15, 12-19 says, you know this passage, but if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. Paul begins to reason here, right? And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith. more than that, if we're then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead, right? Paul is saying, no resurrection, Jesus not raised, why are we preaching about it?

We're liars. If Christ has not been raised, Paul says, your faith is futile, and you're still in your sins, then those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

[27 : 37] If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. Paul is saying that only in this life, if we have hope in Christ, but we're limited to this life only for that hope, we're to be pitied.

there is no resurrection if we view it that way. 1 Corinthians 15, 50-54 says, I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Listen, I tell you a mystery. Such a great passage. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed in a flash in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet.

For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true. Say it with me if you know it. Death has been swallowed up in victory.

[29 : 02] Paul believed strongly and correctly, and it's reflected throughout his theology, through his writing, that the resurrection of the dead is a crucial element of our faith.

The resurrection of the body, the resurrection of anyone who believes in and follows Jesus, is the central element of the one hope Paul speaks of in Ephesians 4, verse 4.

By taking a close look at Paul's defense before the council, as we've done this morning, we can learn some important things as we close. The importance of having a good conscience before God, while also recognizing that we need to stay close to God in prayer, and by reading his word, always asking him to reveal in us the things that we need to confess.

The sin of speaking evil about those who rule over us, and indeed, speaking evil about anyone.

That kind of behavior is not, not, not, not, not what God asks of us, and it can seriously damage our witness.

Friends, don't be a person of whom others say, huh, I didn't know you were a Christian. The connection between our hope in Christ and the bodily resurrection from the dead.

[30 : 28] Do you, and I'm asking you personally, do you have hope in Christ? Do you live every day thanking him and exhibiting the joy that should freely flow, abundantly flow, from that hope?

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, 10, for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done well in the body, whether good or bad.

One day we will all stand before God, not before a council of human beings, we'll be judged for what we have done and what we have not done.

But, do not fear that judgment. Take hold of the hope that you have in Christ. Trust in God's unfailing love for you, and live each day with the examples and reminders that we've been given this morning.

Amen. Amen.