

The Church's Hope

Acts 22:30–23:11

As some of you know, I'm a pretty big fan of the Marvel superhero movies. Yes, I've seen *Endgame*, and no, I'm not going to spoil anything or go all Tolkien on you and turn it into a bunch of sermon illustrations, of how Jesus is the 'true and better Captain America' or something like that. But there's a scene at the beginning of a different Marvel movie, *Thor Ragnarok*, where the film opens with the hero, bound in chains, hanging in a dungeon—the self-proclaimed strongest Avenger, now a prisoner—who then starts monologuing to the audience, “Now, I know what you're thinking: ‘Oh, no. Thor's in a cage. How did this happen?’”

Jumping into our passage this morning where we did, you can almost imagine Paul doing something similar. One of the greatest apostles, who was eager to get to Jerusalem when we last left off, is now in Jerusalem, bound in chains, surrounded by guards, waiting to be hauled before his angry accusers—you can almost picture him saying to us, “I know what you're thinking: ‘Oh no. Paul's in chains. How did that happen?’”

There's obviously some backstory here. If we are not familiar with what has happened between chapters 20 and 23, we're going to be a little confused. So we have to start by looking at the backstory of the previous few chapters and the accusation leveled at Paul that landed him in chains.

The Accusation Leveled (chs. 21-22)

Back in ch. 19, when Paul was still in Ephesus, we were told in v. 21 that he had resolved in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem and then Rome to preach the gospel. He was already on his way to Jerusalem when he stopped in Miletus to talk to the elders from Ephesus. And already there, he let them know that the Holy Spirit had testified to him that “imprisonment and afflictions await” (20:23). Later, when he stopped off in Caesarea, “a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea,” Luke tells us. “And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, “This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles”’” (21:10-11). Paul is not entering into Jerusalem unaware of the trouble that awaits.

So he arrives in Jerusalem in 21:17, and immediately visits James and all the elders there, who rejoice with him as they hear of all God has done among the Gentiles through Paul's ministry (21:19-20). But who also warn him that many of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem are concerned about Paul. They remain “zealous for the law,” and have heard rumors that Paul teaches “all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs” (21:21). Paul's loyalty to Israel and the Law is questioned not

just by unbelieving Jews, but by believing Jews. It reminds us how difficult it still was for the early church to take on board that God's plan for salvation included both Jews and Gentiles, and united them not in the law, but in Jesus (cf. Eph. 2:11-22).

So to quell some of these rumors that might compromise Paul's witness among the Jews, the elders in Jerusalem suggested he participate in a purification ritual as a sign of his observance of the law (21:23-26). And he does that. Problem solved, right? But as he comes to the end of the purification period and arrives at the temple to offer his gift, everything starts to unravel.

Look at ch. 21:27-29 with me:

When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him,²⁸ crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. (21:27-29)

This accusation starts a chain reaction of Jewish riots, Roman interventions, secret plots, public hearings, and strategic appeals that will put Paul's endurance to the test, but also enable him to bear public witness to the gospel not only in Jerusalem, but ultimately in Rome. It's this accusation that feeds into our story this morning, which started with Paul in chains.

So the city starts rioting in response to the accusation, beating Paul and attempting to kill him, until the Roman tribune, a military officer, intervened to stop him (21:30-36). He arrests Paul and brings him to the Roman barracks, where Paul attempts to make his defense publically, pointing everyone to Jesus. But, as soon as he mentions that the gospel is also for the Gentiles, the crowd erupts again and the tribune brings him into the barracks for the night (21:22-24).

Now the tribune is confused. His job is to make sure things don't get out of order in Jerusalem. They don't want any trouble for the empire. So he wants to get to the bottom of what exactly is going on here. Why does everybody hate Paul? His plan is to beat it out of Paul, until he finds out Paul is a Roman citizen, and that would be illegal (21:24-29). So at the end of ch. 22, he calls a meeting for Paul to face his accusers, which begins by revealing the real agenda behind the Jewish leaders' opposition.

The Agenda Revealed (22:30–23:5)

Look with me again at ch. 22:30:

But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. And looking intently at the council, Paul said, 'Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day'" (22:30–23:1).

Paul has been accused of being unfaithful to Israel, her Law, and her temple. His opening remarks declare that the opposite is true; he has lived his life with a good conscience before God. He doesn't depend on the works of the law for his acceptance before God, but he values his Jewish heritage, and he honors God by obeying the Scriptures. He is actually innocent of the

charges against him. He didn't bring Gentiles into the temple, he hasn't reviled the temple or told Jews to disobey the Law. And he makes that clear.

But what happens next reveals what's really going on in this story. This trial isn't really about honoring the law, but opposing Jesus. Look at what those claiming to defend the law do, and how the one accused of breaking the law responds. Verse 2: "And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. 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?'" (23:2-3).

The ones who claim to be defending the law, break it in their opposition to the gospel. Leviticus 19:15 says, "You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor." Ordering someone to be punished before they've even been tried is not justice in court. Paul points this out, snapping back by accusing them of acting like the false prophets in Ezekiel 13, the whitewashed walls who look good on the outside but are simply covering over sin. In other words, he calls the religious leaders hypocrites. They claim to be defending God's law, but their real agenda is revealed by the ease with which they break the law—they're only interested in stopping Jesus.

We can see this same thing in so many ways today. Those who claim to care about women's health or women's rights, but who are perfectly fine with the destruction of thousands of women everyday through abortion. That hypocrisy reveals the real agenda—not women's health, but abortion politics. If you really care about women, you should care about them in every stage of life, and in every place—especially in nations where they are being systematically exterminated through sex-selective abortion.

Similarly, we saw the same hypocrisy displayed by religious conservatives in our recent election cycle. Some of the very same people who vehemently demanded the impeachment of Bill Clinton back in the 90s, on the basis that he had disqualified himself morally through his affair and his lies, dismissed and defended the very same actions by our current president. Which revealed that their agenda was never about morality; it was always about politics. But if character and morality matter, then they matter, regardless of your political party.

When we claim to care about morality or justice or rights, but so easily set aside the very thing we're defending, we reveal that we're really driven by some other agenda. In the same way, Paul's accusers betray their hypocrisy. This trial is a sham. And Paul's says as much. Those who claim to be defending the law reveal their true cards when they break the law break in order to stop the gospel of Jesus. That's what this is about.

Meanwhile, the one accused of breaking the law goes out of his way to obey it. Look at what happens next, v. 4: "Those who stood by said [to Paul], 'Would you revile God's high priest?' 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'" (23:4-5). Now there's a lot of debate over whether Paul is being sarcastic here or straightforward. Did he really not recognize the high priest? Wouldn't he be wearing special garments? Is he saying something kind of snarky, like what an exasperated parent might say to their teenager, 'I'll start treating you like an adult when you start

acting like an adult”? “I didn’t recognize the high priest because he’s not acting like a high priest?” Or did he honestly not know?

Because of the way he seems to own his mistake, and cites the Law as the proper standard to be kept, I think he’s being straightforward. In a situation where Paul is distinguishing his own law-keeping from the lawbreaking of his accusers, I don’t think he would be so cavalier in breaking the law. Though he could be making a sarcastic point. Either way, when he is corrected, he quickly owns his mistake *on the basis of the Law*. He cites Exodus 22:28, “You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.” The one accused of breaking the law goes out of his way to keep it, while those who claim to defend the law willingly break it.

Again, the trial isn’t really about honoring the law; it’s about opposing Jesus. And there are times where we will find ourselves today in a similar position with regard to our witness to Christ. Facing criticism and accusations that aren’t really about the thing we’re accused of, but are leveled at us because of our commitment to Christ and the advance of his gospel. I think of Paul Church’s experience a few years ago. Paul is a member at Trinitarian Church in Wayland. In 2016 four hospitals in the Boston area cut ties with him after 28 years of service, not because he was a bad doctor, but because he was unwilling to let progressive politics rewrite the unmistakable evidence of science and biology, or the clear witness of Scripture, in order to enthusiastically support the LGBT issues that the hospital tried to force upon him.¹ It wasn’t about medicine, it was about a political agenda with an inherent opposition to Christ.

So what do we do when we get caught in the crossfire like that? When we find ourselves being trapped, not because we’ve done something wrong, but because the world wants to stop the message of Christ?

Well, what does the apostle Paul do? Let’s look at his response in vv. 6-11, and the answer he gives.

The Answer Given (vv. 6-10)

In Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus sends his apostles out two-by-two to announce his coming kingdom among the Jews, recognizing that they will be dragged into courts for his sake to bear witness to him, he warns them in Matthew 10:16: “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Wise as serpents and innocent as doves. That is the posture Paul takes in his response.

He has already affirmed his innocence. And being innocent of the charges is necessary. If he had been breaking the Law, then the religious leaders would have been fully justified to silence his witness to Christ on that basis. But Paul had lived in such a way that the charges wouldn’t stick. And that’s necessary for us, too. I remember a high school student I mentored years ago who often complained that he was being persecuted for his faith. After a little digging, it turns out that he was being persecuted for not doing his homework. The trouble he received from his teachers had nothing to do with his faith. We need to be innocent as doves—walking in obedience, and quick to own it when we fall short (as Paul was in this trial).

¹ Edmund DeMarche, “[Prominent doc says LGBT opposition got him excised from hospital staff](#),” *Fox News*, Jan. 5, 2016.

But because the religious leaders' agenda was clear—not to defend the law, but to stop the gospel's advance, Paul's ultimately refuses to play their game. He's not just innocent, he is also wise. He knows that their goal is not really to make the charges stick, but to shut him up and get rid of him and his message. In fact, his strategy here reminds us of Jesus' own interaction with the religious leaders when they would attempt to trap him in his words in order to condemn and get rid of him (e.g., Matt. 22:15-46). He refused to play ball, because his time had not yet come. Neither has Paul's, as he still has yet to preach the gospel in Rome. So look at how he answers in v. 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."

Now on the one hand, Paul is making a true statement. He is on trial because of the hope of the resurrection—the resurrection of Christ, and the resurrection to come. That is our hope as followers of Christ. After all, what if Paul does die as a result of this trial? Does that mean God loses? Does evil win? James died for his witness back in ch. 12. Stephen died in ch. 7. Being delivered from suffering and trial is not our ultimate hope as followers of Christ. Our ultimate hope is that Jesus has defeated sin and conquered the grave. That through faith in him we can be forgiven our sins, which he paid for on the cross, and raised to new life spiritually now, as we're united in his resurrection, and physically in the end when he returns to make all things new in a new heavens and new earth (cf. Col. 2:9-15; 1 Cor. 15:21-26; 2 Pet. 3:13). That is our hope. Jesus wins. Life wins. And there is nothing that can stop God's plan for the good of his people and the glory of his name. What the Jews had looked forward to for the end of time, Jesus took and broke into the present with it when he rose from the dead. The church's hope is the resurrection. Paul makes a true statement.

But he also makes a wise and calculated statement. Because he knows that in affirming the resurrection among this council, he's going to create a little chaos and, Lord willing, evade their trap and keep on track to preach the gospel in Rome. Notice how Luke describes not just what Paul says, but his rationale in saying it: "when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees," he said . . . Paul knew he was about to make a splash. His declaration of the gospel was at the same time like lobbing a smoke grenade into the courtroom.

And that's the effect it had (23:7-10). Because the Pharisees and the Sadducees were divided over the resurrection, among other things. They were both ruling classes among the Jews, the religious elite. But one group was conservative, and the other liberal. The Pharisees had a high view of Scripture, affirmed the holiness of God and his supernatural power and promises; the Sadducees had a lower view of Scripture, denied spiritual realities like angels, the spirit, and resurrection. Both missed the gospel. But when Paul associated himself with the Pharisees and belief in the resurrection, the two factions end up going at each other, becoming so chaotic that the Roman tribune removes Paul from the scene, putting him back in chains but protecting him from the Jewish leaders' attempt on his life. Innocent as doves, and wise as serpents.

And again, we need that same wisdom. Not just innocence, but wisdom to know how to answer our accusers, when to open our mouths, and when to keep it shut. Wisdom to discern whether this conversation is an opportunity to embrace, or a trap to avoid.

And God's the one who gives that wisdom. It's a lot of pressure to think that I have to be as clever as Paul when bearing witness to Christ. It's not about how clever we are, but depending on God to guide us and give us the words. He promises to do that—again, back in Matthew 10: “When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt. 10:19-20). When you find yourself in what feels like a trap, pray for wisdom and trust God to give you the words.

We must always be truthful. We must be bold in our witness for Christ, and willing to be falsely accused (cf. Matt. 5:10-12; 1 Pet. 4:12-19). But in a world that is eager to trap us in our words in order to silence the message of Christ, there are also times when outflanking is a better strategy than full-on assault.

For instance, nowadays, one of the first questions you're likely to be asked if you bring up Jesus, is whether homosexuality is a sin. It is virtually impossible to share the gospel today, especially in New England, without that subject coming up. And we shouldn't be embarrassed about what Scripture teaches—the beauty of God's design of one man and one woman in the covenant of marriage, and the danger of ignoring that design and the damage that results from it. But sometimes, when people ask me what I think about that topic, it's not because they're really interested. It's because they're looking for a quick way to label me as a bigot and write off anything else I might have to say. And so I don't always answer that question right away. If my sense is that this is a trap, I will try to graciously redirect. “That's an important question, and it has some big implications for life, but to really make sense of what Scripture says about that, it helps to understand the bigger picture of the Bible's message—who God is, who we are, who Jesus is and what he has done and why, and what God calls us to do in response.” I want to set the controversial subject in the context of the gospel. Because that's the only way the controversial stuff makes sense. And because you're not saved by agreeing with the Bible's view of sexuality and marriage. You're not saved by agreeing with what Scripture says about human life and abortion. You're not saved by turning from sin and trusting in Jesus.

Gospel witness requires both integrity and wisdom in the face of accusations and opposition. Paul demonstrates that for us in this story.

But there's one more essential ingredient—the most essential, and the most encouraging: the presence of Jesus. And that's what we see in the final verse of the story, v. 11.

The Apostle Strengthened (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’” (23:11). And note here, when Luke uses the word “Lord,” he's usually talking about the Lord Jesus. We know that's the case here because of what the Lord says—“as you have testified to the facts about me.” Jesus is with the apostle to strengthen him for witness in hard places.

And that's the most essential ingredient. That brings us all the way back to the beginning of the book, and the necessity of the church waiting to go out on witness until the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost. Without the presence of Christ by the Spirit, we have no strength or

wisdom for the task. We can't do this on our own. But with the presence of Christ—who appeared to Paul in prison, and who is with every believer right now by the Holy Spirit, we are strengthened for the task. “Take courage,” Jesus says.

And that instruction itself is encouraging. When you're put on the spot, when you feel vulnerable, when you're scared, when you don't know what to say—take courage. Notice he doesn't say, be clever. He doesn't say, figure it out. Or, make me proud. He says, “Take courage.” Jesus is with you. The risen Christ is reigning from his heavenly throne. We do have hope in the resurrection of Jesus, and his gospel will prevail. Just as Paul testified to Christ in Jerusalem, he will in fact testify in Rome. God's plan is unstoppable. And he needs that courage, because the road will not get easier. There are several twists and turns waiting for Paul in his mission to preach the gospel in Rome. But Christ is Lord over all. His blood is enough to cleanse us. His resurrection is enough to give us new life, and secure our victory with him.

The church has a real and lasting hope in Christ. May we take courage in his presence, amid whatever opposition, and persevere in wise and faithful gospel witness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions for Study and Understanding

1. What happened to Paul when he finally arrived in Jerusalem, that helps us understand why he is now in chains? What precisely is he being accused of? (hint: see 21:27-36)
2. Summarize the interaction between Paul and his accusers. How does Paul handle himself? How do his accusers treat him? In what way does Paul make his defense?
3. How would you summarize Paul's relationship to the Law of Moses, versus the Pharisees and Sadducees' relationship? What does that reveal about the religious leaders' true agenda?
4. Why do you think Paul says what he says in v. 6?
5. What is the significance of Jesus showing up in v. 11?
6. How would you summarize the big idea of this story?

Questions for Reflection and Application

7. What principles might we draw from this passage that could help us think about our own witness in hard places?
8. How does being mindful of and depending on the presence of Christ give you courage as you serve him today?