

Acts 23:1-11 - Paul's Defense Before the Sanhedrin

Paul recognizes the makeup of his audience. Half are Sadducees, the other half Pharisees (Acts 23:6). These two groups had sharp disagreements about the Jewish religion. The Pharisees taught a more conservative understanding of the law and held all the books of the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative. Furthermore, they believed in a resurrection from the dead. The Sadducees, conversely, only held Genesis to Deuteronomy as authoritative and denied a bodily resurrection. Paul exploits this disparity and declares that he stands trial because he holds to the hope of the resurrection of the dead. His words function like tinder and gasoline on an already smoldering fire. The assembly erupts as the two competing worldviews clash (v 7-8). The disagreement culminates when the Pharisee party declares Paul's innocence of all charges (v 9). The scene ends with the tribune intervening by having Paul taken and removed from the situation (v 10).

This section provides a parable for our modern times. Many opponents of Christianity today highlight the innumerable denominations and sects which exist in the church. The charge goes something like this: "How can Christians lay any claim to the truth if they themselves have divided so many times and cannot present a united message?" The scene in Acts 23, however, is a reminder that opponents of Christianity often disagree within their own camps on issues of truth, too. The charge can easily be turned back on those who so confidently level it at the Christian faith. Left to ourselves, humanity will never think and act in a way in accordance with the truth. Only through God's grace and God's revelation—which comes from outside of humanity and was incarnated in humanity—can humanity know the truth and embody the truth. Christians, like all humans, sometimes disagree, but Jesus is the Truth (John 14:6). We must look to the Word to discover the truth.

Paul's actions reveal the prudence of discernment and acting wisely in difficult circumstances. In using his knowledge of this audience, Paul shifted the focus of the trial from his faith to their doctrinal divisions. With one swift comment, Paul redirected the attention of the entire proceedings. Paul no longer stood on trial. He had taken the conversation into a deeply theological and significant doctrinal matter. Christians can learn from Paul in these proceedings. Through a simple question, we can shift conversations from an assault on Christian teaching to the hearts and worldviews of those to whom we speak.

Acts 24:1-23 - Paul Before Felix

Faced with the hatred of his accusers, Paul does not respond to hatred with hatred. Rather he sees each interaction, and even the whole ordeal of his arrest and imprisonment (of several years), as a chance to proclaim the gospel. He witnesses to the grace of God and warns of the consequences awaiting those who reject it. Paul's defense is brilliant. In verse 11, he begins to dismantle each of Tertullus' accusations. In all likelihood, when Paul mentions the "twelve days" here, he is referring to the total amount of time he spent in Jerusalem until his trial before Felix. In other words, Paul ridicules Tertullus by using the simple fact that twelve days cannot afford even the most charismatic of leaders the opportunity to stir up a great deal of dissension and sedition. Indeed, the Jews, when they first found Paul, found him in no dispute with any person in Jerusalem (v 12). Paul then puts Tertullus and the Jewish leaders on the defensive by claiming

that the burden of proof falls on them to substantiate the charges (v 13). He openly, and cheerfully, testifies to being a Christian, and he firmly grounds the roots of his faith in the Jewish Scriptures (v 14). And, far from being a political sect, Paul says that Christians are committed to following the way of the Lord—that is, “the Way” is a way of spiritual reform, not of political subversion.

Paul’s defense should remind all believers of the absolute necessity of the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul roots his identity as a Christian in the foundation of the Hebrew texts, which expressed an aching for and pointed toward the day of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament contains the promise of God to his people. The very foundation of Jesus’ ministry flows from the pages of that sacred text, where God appeared with fire on the mountain, where God pronounced through his prophets the coming day of his Son; and where God enshrined his promises for all generations everywhere. Without the Old Testament, there would be no Christian faith.

Acts 25:1-12 - Paul & Festus

Here we see a picture of God’s creative sovereignty as he redirects injustice for his good purposes. Paul is embroiled in a legal squabble that has kept him imprisoned in Caesarea for two years (24:27), even while he yearns to bring the gospel to Rome (19:21). But in God’s providence this convoluted legal squabble becomes the means for the gospel to reach Rome. When Festus attempts to transfer Paul out of his jurisdiction, Paul seizes the opportunity: taking advantage of his right as a Roman citizen, Paul appeals directly to the emperor, guaranteeing a journey to Rome. It is unlikely that Paul ever imagined that his journey to Rome would occur in chains. But Paul was confident that God would fulfill his promise (23:11), and he knew that God’s sovereignty works even through convoluted legal structures. Knowing that God is in control and that his gospel will ultimately triumph allows us, like Paul, to take creative risks for God and trust him in the times of confusion and suffering.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Look at Acts 22:30-23:11 - Paul saw every place he went to as an opportunity to preach Christ, and no problem or weakness as an excuse not to. What would change in your life if you adopted that mindset?
2. When talking with non-Christians about Christ, how could you gently & respectfully point out the contradictions or weaknesses in the worldview they are espousing? How does Paul do it?
3. While the details of 23:11 were specific to Paul, how does what it reveal about God encourage you today toward continuing to seek to share the gospel with those around you?
4. In Acts 24, Paul operates out of a healthy fear of God, while Felix operates out of an unhealthy fear of man. Why is it liberating to live seeking the approval only of the Lord?
5. Look back at Acts 25:1-12 - What can you learn from Paul’s behavior in the face of hateful accusations? What difference does it make to know that every apparently unpredictable twist and turn of life is in fact under the Lord’s sovereign control?