

Words and Deeds: A House Divided
By Jason Huff
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Proverbs 3:27-35; Matthew 22:23-34; Acts 22:22-23:10

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 22:22-23:10. May God open our hearts and minds to the reading of His perfect, sacred, and holy Word.

“The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the commander ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and questioned in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this.

As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "This man is a Roman citizen." The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes, I am," he answered. Then the commander said, "I had to pay a big price for my citizenship." "But I was born a citizen," Paul replied. Those who were about to question him withdrew immediately.

The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains. The next day, since the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.

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, "You dare to 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 the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in 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 that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) 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.”

When I was on a mission team many years ago in Russia, our team had a little red money wallet we would toss around. We dubbed it “the brain.” Whenever we had a decision to make about what to eat or what movie to watch, somebody would toss another person in the group the wallet and said, “You have the brain.” From that moment, only that person could make a decision about what we were doing as a group that night. No debate, no division...we just went along with it. We solved a lot of debates that way and stayed out of a lot of arguments.

But some things divide people more than others...religion and politics among them. (And if you stayed out of one of those conversations over the 4th of July, good for you!) Some of our deeply held beliefs are so strong that no one is going to convince us otherwise. Those kind of arguments can really hurt. But in our passage today, Paul uses the division amongst the Jewish leadership to his advantage, and God spares his life as the assembly that was once determined to see Paul dead winds up in disarray with some of them actually defending Paul. God uses the long-standing rivalry between two factions to get His servant Paul to safety.

So let's backtrack. Paul came to Jerusalem knowing he would wind up in chains, but he did so trusting in the Lord's salvation. Eventually, a mob formed when some folks from Ephesus saw Paul as went to the temple to finish a series of ceremonial washings, ironically to show that being a Christian didn't take away from his Jewish heritage. They accused him of being against the Jews, against the temple – and finally, a large contingent of Roman soldiers wound up saving him. He convinced them to let him speak to the crowd, only for the riot to stir back up when he told them that God had specifically sent him to minister to the Gentiles, their sworn enemies.

Before the crowd can stone him, the Roman commander orders Paul be brought back to the barracks. But the Roman commander doesn't have justice in mind. He wants to get rid of a problem. That's why he orders Paul to be interrogated and flogged. This isn't a detective trying to get a confession out of an unwilling suspect. Paul's talked to the commander. No, the commander is put out and wants to be done with the situation...sound like the story of Pontius Pilate? It should, because the same thing is happening – convenience over justice.

The kind of flogging Paul would have endured was the same kind Jesus went through. Unlike the kind of whipping the Jews used for punishment, the Roman flogging involved a whip studded with bits and pieces of rocks and glass. It was meant to rip. It was terrible. And while the Jews were restricted to 40 lashes, there was no restriction on a Roman whipping of a non-citizen. Many people died from it or infection from it. If Paul was to die, the commander's problem would have been solved. Now the commander wants to get an answer to his question about why the crowd was attacking Paul, but if Paul dies, so be it.

So they have Paul stretched out on the whipping post and a centurion is about to start when Paul pulls out his trump card, his ace in the hole – he's a Roman citizen who hasn't had a trial. And immediately, everyone backs off. The centurion makes a beeline for the commander's office. What they've done is a major offense. They've put a citizen in chains; that was bad enough. But had they flogged him, each one of them could have been put to death by Roman law. That was how seriously the Romans took citizenship. A citizen had rights and privileges others in the Roman Empire didn't have. One right was that a Roman citizen couldn't be punished unless convicted of a crime.

So the commander comes and asks Paul about it. We might wonder why they didn't ask this sooner if the penalty for mistreating a citizen was so severe. It's likely that out in Israel, a backwater of the empire, they rarely if ever came across Roman citizens. It happened so seldom, they didn't even think to ask. But Paul says, "Yes." And immediately all the soldiers involved back off. They don't want to be identified at the scene of the crime!

The commander is a citizen too, but he had to pay a large sum of money for his citizenship. Probably through years and years of hard work in the Roman army, setting aside his pay, moving up the ranks, he'd finally cleared enough to buy his way in. But Paul was born with it. He hadn't had to do anything. Thanks to the grace of God, Paul's avoiding death at this moment was determined decades before because of his parents and the place he was born.

Here's what I want us to consider this morning for a moment: *We are citizens of God's Kingdom given rights and privileges and responsibilities.* In most countries today, citizenship is granted to you based on where you are born. Sometimes, you are lucky enough to be born with dual citizenship, maybe if your parents were in the military and you're born in another country that gives citizenship to everyone born on their soil. Just this last week, we celebrated the birth of our country and the freedoms we have as citizens.

And just like that Roman soldier, you can become a US citizen if you weren't born here, but it costs a lot...maybe not a ton of money up front, but a lot of time and a lot of hard work learning about our country. People who become American citizens through immigration often know far more about our country and its history than natural-born citizens do.

But as much as we appreciate what it means to be citizens of the United States, it pales in comparison to our other citizenship – our citizenship in the Kingdom of God. You also can't buy your way in. No amount of money can get you in the pearly gates. You can't earn your way in through good deeds. Being a good person doesn't make you a citizen of heaven any more than being a good person could get you a citizenship in Rome.

The only way to become a citizen of the Kingdom of God is to be born into it. You might remember how Jesus had a conversation with the Pharisee named Nicodemus who came to talk to him at night to avoid suspicion. He told Nicodemus, "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again." It confused Nicodemus, who was thinking of a literal birth, but Jesus clarified that to be born again meant to be born of the Holy Spirit.

That's how we become Kingdom citizens – for God to instill in us the faith in Jesus that saves us, for God to create us anew through His Holy Spirit, for God to cover us in the garment of Jesus' righteousness so we are seen as clean and whole and new in Him. We are born again in Him, made blameless and made citizens of the Kingdom as sons and daughters of the King.

But there is no dual citizenship. You belong to the prince of this world or the King of the next. You can't love the world and love the Kingdom of God. May we always be mindful, as Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 2:11, that we are aliens and strangers in this world. We are travelers here just passing through. We don't want to get comfortable here; instead, we want to be watching for ways that we can introduce God's Kingdom into this world.

Now, moving on in the passage...the commander, no doubt a bit fearful if someone were to find out that he'd ordered the scourging of a Roman citizen, demands the Jewish leadership come together. He wants to get to the bottom of this, so he has Paul come to talk to them. And Paul is upfront: his conscience is clear about all his actions before them and before God.

Before he can even go on, the high priest Ananias orders him slapped...even though it's breaking God's law. It seems like Paul has had enough – these men will break the law in full view of the court, yet they are the ones to judge him based on the law? When he strongly points out the hypocrisy, they come back that he is insulting God's high priest. And Paul is like, "I didn't know – for Scripture says, "Don't speak evil of the ruler of your people."

Now this is kind of a strange exchange; we're not certain Paul is in the right or not. What's going on? The high priest was obviously in the wrong, and he doesn't care anything for the law to have Paul slapped simply because he doesn't like what he has to say. But why would Paul call out the high priest?

There are a few possibilities. The first, and the one that most fits given what we know about Paul, is simply that his eyesight is really bad and he doesn't know that it was the high priest that wanted him slapped. The second is that Paul knows he was speaking to the high priest, that he is speaking in sarcasm about not speaking evil about the rulers, that Paul no longer acknowledges the high priest. That seems pretty unlikely. The third possibility has to do with the politics of the priesthood – there was vying and jockeying for position within the families of the high priesthood at the time, and it wasn't always clear (even to the Jews!) who was considered to be the one high priest at the moment. Paul genuinely might not have known that Ananias was serving as the high priest at the moment.

What's going on here is so complicated that we can't pull out a spiritual theme for us easily. We should respect our elders and leadership; we see that here. And yet Paul is willing to call out members of the council due to their hypocrisy and unfaithfulness. We as Christians live in the tension of both respecting authority and calling it out when it does wrong. We pray for our leaders; we praise them when they follow God; we also call them out when they fail God's standard. And we're grateful we live in a country that allows that. We don't belong to this world, but we can be thankful God placed us in a country that gives us the opportunities we have.

Back to the story...Paul's getting nowhere. The council is obviously hostile to him. So Paul pulls out his second trump card...he is a born-and-bred Pharisee. What's the argument really about, Paul asks? His belief that the dead will be resurrected. Which is true, since Jesus rose again and promised His followers that they would rise again with Him someday. But this was a huge point of disagreement between the Pharisees and Sadducees, the leading viewpoints within the Jewish council.

The Sadducees only held to the first five books of Scripture and had no supernatural viewpoint; they believed that all your rewards for what you did were in this life. They were old-money families who held onto power through the priesthood. Like Jesus, though, they opposed the never-ending rules and regulations the Pharisees imposed on the people.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, held to the whole of the Old Testament. They were far more open to the promise of the Messiah and supernatural works and wonders. But they also thought that righteousness meant to follow their rules, far beyond anything the Law ever stated. And they condemned anyone who didn't follow their particular brand of Judaism.

So Paul throws a wrench into the works. By claiming that this was a dispute regarding His beliefs as a Pharisee, he starts a gigantic argument between the two factions. It gets so heated that the Pharisees start defending Paul! What if some supernatural being really did speak to him? It's not so much that they believe that Jesus is the Messiah; it's more them trying to get a crack in at their political rivals. And for the third time, an argument gets so vicious around Paul that the Romans have to step in to make sure Paul isn't torn limb from limb.

A house divided cannot stand. Jesus used that phrase when the Pharisees accused Him of driving out demons by the power of the prince of demons. Jesus showed how that was ludicrous; how can a force attacking itself possibly keep fighting? It was true for Judaism too. Once the rebellion of 67AD was put down and Jerusalem destroyed, without the power of a high priesthood, the Sadducee party fell apart; the Pharisees won by default, and the practices of the modern Jewish faith are those of the ancient Pharisee party. When the Jewish people were forced to disperse to the four winds, the only way they were able to preserve their culture and history as a people was to unite around the prevailing viewpoint, and that's what they did.

We see a lot of enemies of Christianity in our culture and around the world today. It might make us fearful for the future, and for our children's future. But a house divided cannot stand. We belong to the Kingdom of God; we've been reborn as its citizens. When we stand with all true Christians around the world, faithful believers from every nation and every people group and even every denomination where the Word of God is still preached and God's Spirit is working, under the banner of our Lord Jesus, we know we cannot fall.

The opposition to Christianity around the world may be powerful, but it is divided. The history of socialism and communism and Islamic law around the world shows that when Christianity is purged, the enemies of the faith start turn on themselves. Every house that stands against the Lord divides because without God, there is no solid ground of truth. Christianity is growing in China, in Africa, in Latin America – sometimes despite fierce opposition.

God is not of two minds. He is a deliverer, and He will deliver us. His house is not divided. As Jesus shared with us, while the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three unique persons, they are the one true God who are absolutely integrated, who share a common will and purpose, who are one at their very core. Everything they do, they do in lockstep with each other. This means that no matter what evil comes our way, God will overcome it.

Because of Jesus, there is a resurrection coming. Hope is coming. Peace is coming. The world will not stand when He comes again in power. We can be confident. God, who delivered Paul from death, who redeemed Jesus from the grave, who gave us new life in the Spirit, will not fail us. He will bring all of us citizens of His Kingdom home, into His new heaven and new earth where there will be no division of loyalties, no hostilities against us, only a united song of "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come."