Text: Acts 22:30-23:10
Title: A Divided Court
Truth: Paul was confident he had done nothing wrong before God, even though the court was not disposed to find the same.
Date/Location: Wednesday March 19, 2014 and April 2, 2025 at FBC

I. Paul's Basic Defense, v. 22:30-23:1

A. The commanded ordered the chief priests and the council to gather. This refers to the San Hedrin, a body that ruled and functioned as supreme court over the Jews. There were 71 members. The high priest(s) were part.

B. "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." What does Paul mean?

1. It does not mean that throughout his entire life he lived perfectly, including when he persecuted Christians. He did live a fairly "moral" life as far as the standard that he had (Phil. 3:5-6) but that standard was a legalistic standard that clung to the law as a means of righteousness and permitted him to have the depraved idea that it is right to kill Christian people. He did not realize that righteousness could never come by the Law until later in his life.

2. I understand his saying to mean that since his conversion, and in his missionary ministry, and in this latest flap over his presence in the temple, he has lived before God with a clean conscience. His conscience is not accusing him of anything wrong. None of the things he is charged for are true. In other words, he is innocent. Paul could say that he did not violate God's law, or disrespect it, or tell others to forsake it, as he was being charged.

3. We are right to read the text in such a way that we assume Paul's conscience is working well. He does not want to be a criminal before the government, nor a guilty sinner before God. He is reflecting a healthy conscience in accordance with Romans 2:15. The conscience is the part of our inner selves which affirms or condemns us with regard to our actions. If we steal a cookie, our conscience talks to us. If we helped someone, the conscience encourages us that we did well.

C. I want to be able to say the same thing as Paul said. There are some things that I know in my own life that are not right or have not been right in the past, and I confess them and repent of them and work on them. That is part of having a good conscience. But also, there is an objective

way that I can say there are no things I could be subjected to criminal trial by the state. There are also no things that would keep me out of heaven because I have been imputed the righteousness of Christ.

We need to strive to have a clear conscience before God. If we do not, we need to make it so.

II. An Illegal Assault and Battery, v. 2

A. The high priest actually said aloud that one of the officers must slap the mouth of a fellow Jewish full-grown man who was being tried for what we know as utterly false charges. The high priest so hated Paul that he could not contain himself when Paul claimed that he was living in good conscience before God. He figured there is no conceivable way that could be true, but it was the priest that was wrong about this, not Paul.

B. The "officer of the court" did just what he was commanded, in defiance of any ethics or righteousness. This was contrary to the Law because guilt had not been established. The proceedings had just barely started!

(Have you ever been embarrassingly wrong about something where you just knew yourself to be right, but then found out some information that totally turned around your thinking?)

III. Paul Responded Two Ways, v. 3-5

A. With an angry imprecation: "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall." This was a strong saying. He was prophesying that God would punish Ananias for his sinful behavior. And eventually, that will be the case for all who reject Jesus or his messengers and their message (Luke 10:16). Also, calling him a whitewashed wall was saying that he had a mere veneer of righteousness but was rotten at the core (Matt. 23:37).

1. Some who were in room asked him if he was reviling the high priest of God. Was Paul correct to respond this way? He did not follow the example of our Lord when he was struck (1 Peter 2:21-23). Jesus asked calmly why the man hit him (John 18:19-23). But Paul did not give careful respect to the office held by Ananias, who was high priest. I suppose that we could say Ananias held the office illegitimately, but he still held the office. So, Paul was in the wrong. In verses 4-5 he patched things up.

2. He said that he did not know it was the high priest (v. 5). That is believable, because the high priest was not acting like a high priest should act, and Paul mistook him for some other official. Also, Paul had been gone from Jerusalem over most of the past 14 years, so he

was not in the loop on who was who. Perhaps also the high priest was not wearing his official garb because the meeting was hastily called together by the Roman commander.

3. He admitted his error by quoting Exodus 22:28.This would serve to clear his conscience once again!

B. With an appeal to the rule of law. This is like what he did the previous day with the Roman commander in 22:25. In this new situation, he was dead on right that the high priest could not order him to be punished before the trial even began! The high priest pretended to be a judge according to the law but could not control himself within those parameters. His hypocrisy was evident for all to see. Both the priest and Paul had a sinful part in this interaction. But no apology came from the priest.

IV. Paul Decided on a Course of Action, v. 6

A. Although he did not know initially who the high priest was, Paul understood the political factions that made up the San Hedrin council. He also could see that a fair trial was going to be impossible, so he would have to appeal to someone outside for help.

B. He appealed to the Pharisee party by saying he himself (still) was a Pharisee and that he held a key belief that drove his actions, namely the hope and resurrection of the dead. This was not a made up thing to get a political fight going; Paul actually did believe in the resurrection of Jesus and of all who are in Him; this was a major point of his theology, and it was a major difference between the Sadducee and Pharisee parties who made up the council. The Pharisee party held the possibility of resurrection, but the Sadducees did not believe in it (Matt 22:23). Jesus had rebuked these people years earlier for their wrong doctrine (Matt. 22:31-33).

C. Paul correctly understood from the Old Testament that there would be a resurrection – Job 19:26-27, Ezekiel 37:12, and Daniel 12:2. To the careful reader, there is a clue of the same in Isaiah 53:12, where the Servant will be cut off in death, but will then share a portion with the great and will divide the spoil with the mighty, implying a resurrection.

The New Testament is abundantly clear that there will be a resurrection of all those who have lived and then subsequently died (1 Cor. 15:22, John 5:28, Acts 24:15, Rev. 20:5-6). (Those who are alive at Christ's return will be 'transformed' with the result the same as resurrection.)

V. Great Dissension Broke Out, v. 7-10

Paul's approach worked, after a fashion. It created such chaos that the hearing had to be cut short.

A. Paul cleverly exposed and exploited the doctrinal differences between the two parties. The Pharisees were the literalists of their day, and the Sadducees the liberals.

Sadducees – no resurrection, no angels, no spirits. They were the *naturalists* of their day, seemingly not believing in anything outside the realm of their own sense experience. It does not seem possible to believe in God Himself if you think this way.

Pharisees – yes to all: resurrection, angels, and spirits. They were the *supernaturalists* in their day.

B. Since Paul believed like the Pharisees and identified with them, they did not want to judge against him, because in effect that would be judging against themselves. Perhaps there was enough wiggle room in their theology to allow someone with Paul's beliefs. There certainly was no room to allow for the Sadducees belief system. So, they got up (to leave?) and basically said this is a good guy, and perhaps God spoke to Paul through an angel or spirit (note that, Sadducees). They did not want to fight against God if that were the case (see also Acts 5:39).

C. In response, the commander had to rescue Paul a second time. Paul was brought back to jail.

Conclusion

We need to re-emphasize the need to maintain a clear conscience before God. This will not always result in people thinking you are such a good person, but at least you will be OK with God and God will be OK with you. For example, today many people hate Christians for their adherence to standards of righteousness that the unbeliever does not like. The Christian has a good conscience, but the unbeliever might even call the Christian *evil*! "What do you mean abortion should be outlawed? What are you, some kind of evil person who likes to see unwanted babies suffer?" Obviously, this is entirely wrong, but it passes for logic in some circles. Do not let it phase you. Keep on the right path.

It is hard to draw an application from Paul's conduct in front of the San Hedrin. We certainly do not want to drop to the level of imprecation. But we may take note of his savvy in terms of getting out of a trial that was not going to be fair. He turned the judges against themselves. Hopefully, we never have to use a tactic like that! MAP