

71 ANGRY MEN

ACTS 23:1-11 JANUARY 13, 2021

Al Pacino was nominated for an academy award for his acting in 1979's ...*And Justice For All*. In a climactic scene, Pacino's character, a defense attorney, becomes indignant at the injustice of the system and starts ranting the now famous lines: "You're out of order! The whole trial is out of order! They're out of order!...It's just a show." As he's being forcibly removed from the courtroom he shouts, "I've just completed my opening statement."

The performance was powerful, but not enough to nab Al the Oscar. It went to Dustin Hoffman that year.¹ Not to worry, Pacino was *back* in the courtroom in a role that would ultimately win him the academy award in 1992's *Scent Of A Woman*. You may remember the famous scene, where Pacino, defending his client, becomes indignant at the injustice of the system and starts ranting the now famous lines: "What a sham! What kind of a show you're putting on today. I'll show you out of order. You don't know what out of order is!" Second time's the charm, I suppose.

In our text we'll see a wild courtroom scene. Paul doesn't even finish his opening statement before the trial collapses into violent mayhem. Unlike Pacino, the Apostle doesn't become unhinged or enraged. Though he does have to be removed for his own safety.

Now, Paul before the Jewish Sanhedrin is a big deal. Other apostles had stood in front of them in earlier chapters, but this was the first time that Paul would testify before them. He probably knew some of these fellows personally, or at least *used* to. Though this was the crowd he ran with before his conversion, this would be the first time he was in their presence since he became a disciple of Jesus Christ. And now, here he is, before the ruling body, the highest court, the experts and authorities. And who among them *wouldn't* be struck by the profound transformation in Paul's life, the power of his logic in expounding the Scriptures and the undeniable proofs he would present that Jesus was, in fact, their long-awaited Messiah?

Paul wasn't naive, but what anticipation he must have had. That *this* might be *the moment* when everything changed for his nation.

Did you know that Billy Graham preached in North Korea? In 1992 the world's foremost evangelist brought the message of the Gospel to Pyongyang, speaking at Kim Il Sung University and had a personal meeting with Kim Il Sung, North Korea's dictator at the time.² What a scene that must've been! And yet, from what we measure, no revival, no Nineveh moment. No dramatic conversion. Kim Il Sung died the next month and by 1994 the US was seriously considering war against them.

Sometimes the best man for the job *does* his job, but nothing really changes. We'll see that playing out in the verses tonight. Paul does *not* break through the hard hearts of the Sanhedrin. In fact, their response to just a *few* of his words is violence and rage.

As we've seen before, some commentators are bent on criticizing Paul through this whole section of his life, since he decided to go to Jerusalem. They look at what happens and decide that Paul,

¹ <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1980>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/21/how-billy-graham-took-his-crusade-to-north-korea/>

outside the will of God, responding in anger. That he was acting as a “shrewd psychologist” who enjoyed watching these Jewish rulers squabble.³

One commentator *in* our text disagrees with this assessment: Jesus Christ. At the end of our verses He will appear to Paul and, rather than rebuke him, He *endorses* his choices. Why this doesn’t settle the debate over this issue, I don’t know.

Rather than seeing Paul as some unhinged Pacino, a better lesson is the helpful reminder that manmade systems, *ultimately*, are not going to do the right thing. Sometimes men’s hearts are so hard that it is hopeless to think we can rehabilitate the structures they have built up. Which is why, as Christians, our function is to be *witnesses*, not *architects* of a human utopia. On display here is the reality that the *methods* of the Sanhedrin were too far gone to be salvaged, but individual *members* were not too far to be saved. That was Paul’s hope. And it should be ours too.

J. Vernon McGee has a timely quote for us. He said:

“In our day there are a great many people who feel that if we change our form of government, or at least if we change our party from the one that is in power - whichever it may be - this will give us a solution to all our problems. It has never solved our problems in the past... We wonder why the system won’t work. We think we need to change the system. Do you know what we need? We need to change men’s hearts. It is man that needs changing, not the system.”⁴

So, let’s begin and see how this played out, starting in verse 1.

Acts 23:1 - Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience to this day.”

This opening statement is bold. It sounds like it’s coming from a man who is completely unafraid, unintimidated. And yet, we’ll see that Jesus feels the need to say, “take courage, Paul.” Apparently Paul *was* afraid and discouraged. How does this add up? I believe it shows us that the Lord was making good on His promise when He said:

Luke 12:11-12 - ¹¹ Whenever they bring you before synagogues and rulers and authorities, don’t worry about how you should defend yourselves or what you should say. ¹² For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what must be said.

Now, how *could* Paul honestly make this claim? Well, notice he *didn’t* say that he had lived his life in *perfection*. He speaks of his clean conscience. What is conscience?

Warren Wiersbe says, “Conscience is the inner ‘judge’ or ‘witness’ that approves when we do right and disapproves when we do wrong. Conscience does not set the standard; it only applies it.”⁵

The standard for Christians is God’s word, which has been given to guide us, instruct us and measure us. And in God’s word we are commanded to: “keep faith and have a clean conscience.” Which means we must learn and apply the Biblical standard to our thoughts, choices and behavior.

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse *Acts: An Expository Commentary*

⁴ J. Vernon McGee *Acts: Chapters 15-28*

⁵ Warren Wiersbe *The Bible Exposition Commentary*

We recognize that the Bible is authoritative for life and Godliness that we might be *complete*. And we should keep that truth close to heart, in these times when the world around us is calling good evil and evil good.

Acts 23:2 - ²The high priest Ananias ordered those who were standing next to him to strike him on the mouth.

There were at least 3 things that would've made a man like Ananias angry: First, but calling them "brethren," Paul made himself a *peer* of these supposedly great men. Second, he suggested that not only was he *innocent*, but that he was *just* before God. Third, he spoke before being spoken to. Scoundrels like Ananias don't like any of this and so he *illegally* had Paul struck.

Ananias may have held the office of high priest at the time, but he was by no means a Godly man. Historians record him as being a thieving glutton. He was tried for *cruelty* and it's recorded that he would send thugs to steal the food from some of the priests in the temple, beating those who stood in their way, and leading to the starvation for some of them.⁶ So, *that's* the chief justice here.

We can also notice that, as a body, the Sanhedrin has been progressing in their refusal to hear the message of grace. Think of it: In Acts 4 they had listened, then warned the disciples. In Acts 5, they listened but jailed and flogged the disciples. In Acts 6 and 7 they listened to Stephen, but then murdered him. And now, in Acts 23, they will no longer listen. After *so many* attempts made by God to show them grace and offer them forgiveness, they had come to an end. They're set in stone now. And we will see them no more after this, other than a delegation that goes to accuse Paul further.

There comes a point in the lives of people and nations where they cement their hearts so much against the Gospel that they will not hear it anymore. We don't always know when that point is, but it happens. And while God strives with men day by day He calls out to them in *both* Testaments: "When you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." These men had to their own ruin.

Acts 23:3 - ³Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! You are sitting there judging me according to the law, and yet in violation of the law are you ordering me to be struck?"

A lot of commentators accuse Paul here of wrongdoing. They say he snapped. That his temper flared. That he lost his composure and that the flesh prevailed. However, David Guzik rightly points out that we have no idea the *tone* of Paul's statement. We *assume* it to be harsh, maybe it wasn't. When's the last time your tone was misunderstood on a text message?

Think of Paul's track record. Remember how gracious he had been leading up to this moment, to the mob and to the Romans. Later, Jesus does not rebuke him for this statement. And we remember the promise that the Holy Spirit would speak through God's servants in exactly this situation. In fact, on top of that, thanks to the vantage point of history we know that this statement was a *prophetic utterance*! A few years after this scene, Ananias would be assassinated because of his ties to the Romans. It's *possible* that Paul lost his temper, but nothing he said here was wrong or unfair.

Acts 23:4 - ⁴Those standing nearby said, "Do you dare revile God's high priest?"

⁶ Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews*

It's amazing how broken manmade systems can become. Suddenly these guys are worried about Godliness and honor and conduct? Meanwhile, Paul is being illegally treated in a trial for which there is no evidence because he had done nothing wrong!

Acts 23:5 - ⁵“I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest,” replied Paul. “For it is written, You must not speak evil of a ruler of your people.”

There are a lot of theories about this verse. Some think Paul was being ironic, snarky even, saying that a man *like that* couldn't be high priest. Others blame his bad eyesight. Others note that the high priests changed so frequently in these days, it was hard to know who had the title. Sometimes they had 3 in a year!⁷ He also wouldn't have been in his official garments, as established in Ezekiel 44:19.

Some think Paul was finally getting control of himself and was walking back his angry outburst. But he doesn't apologize. I suppose it will remain a mystery on this side of heaven, but two points present themselves.

First, in reality, this man *was not* God's high priest. For one thing, he had disqualified himself through his ongoing life of sin. For another, *Herod* had appointed him for the office. But, most importantly, *Jesus Christ* was now and is forever God's High Priest. Having died, rose again and ascended, He now functions as God's Great High Priest, Who has entered heaven and rules over God's house.⁸

But a second point is this: What Paul said still holds as a standard for us. “You must not speak evil of a ruler of your people.” Man, that's a tough one, isn't it? Let me make it a little worse for us:

Ecclesiastes 10:20a - ²⁰Do not curse the king even in your thoughts

These are *commands* given to us. We are to honor authority, submit to it, and respect the offices. We do not have to agree with Godless men or unjust behavior, but our Lord sets this as the standard. Let's *not* be like the Sanhedrin and instead calibrate our consciences according to the word of God.

Acts 23:6 - ⁶When Paul realized that one part of them were Sadducees and the other part were Pharisees, he cried out in the Sanhedrin, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am being judged because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead!”

Here some commentators once again accuse Paul of less-than-Christian behavior. They say he was manipulating them, trying to get himself out of a self-inflicted jam. I don't see it that way. For one thing, it's true that the trouble with the Jews came from the preaching that Jesus was resurrected.

But we can observe that Paul *frequently* had an exit strategy. I don't mean that in a negative sense at all. It was clear that this door was shut, no one was going to listen. So, since there was no preaching left to do that day, Paul brought the scene to an end. It reminds me of when he said, “Are you allowed to scourge a Roman citizen?” And later when he'll say, “Ok, that's enough, I appeal to Caesar.” He was mindful and thoughtful and prudent in the way he carried himself.

Don't move on before noticing that a *third* time he calls them “brothers.” Paul *loved* his fellow Jews. He *truly* loved them and wanted them to be saved.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_High_Priests_of_Israel#Herodian-Roman_period

⁸ Hebrews 4:14, 10:21

Acts 23:7-8 - ⁷When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, and neither angel nor spirit, but the Pharisees affirm them all.

The Sadducees denied the supernatural. They believed there was no heaven, no hell, they didn't even think humans had a spirit! They believed there was a God but that He didn't care what you did, as there were no punishments or rewards after death. It begs the question: What point is there having a high priest who doesn't believe in any of those things?

Now, we are called priests in the New Testament. Our doctrines are given to us in the Scripture. They're about life and death, mercy and grace, hope and truth. The question is: Do we *live* what we believe? Or have we become wrapped up in the temporal, material, manmade systems like the Sadducees? We say we believe that righteousness exalts a nation and that it is the *Gospel* that brings hope and transformation to lives and communities. But then do we live that out? Or, like McGee said earlier, do we keep going to human systems hoping *they* will solve our problems?

This melee between the Pharisees and the Sadducees looks a lot like our country right now. They needed little excuse to break out in violent opposition to one another. We see a bitter, partisan resentment. Now compare this to what we read back in Acts 15, the Jerusalem council. There, *the Church* gathered to settle and bridge this serious rift between points of view. And it was done without violence, without hatred, without anarchy. And the church wasn't just 2 parties like we see here. We're talking zealots and tax collectors, Jews and Samaritans, academics and fishermen. That's what God does when He's in charge of hearts. He brings *peace* and *grace* to His Church.

Acts 23:9 - ⁹The shouting grew loud, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party got up and argued vehemently, "We find nothing evil in this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"

It wasn't just the Sadducees who were hypocrites. The Pharisees didn't *actually* believe this. They hated Paul! Even *Christians* in the Pharisee party were against him! Again we see the breakdown of the human system. Everything that was happening was happening because of political motivations.

As Christians, our motivations are to be *relational* not *political*. That's how Simon the zealot can live and work with Matthew the tax collector. As I always try to point out, that doesn't mean that Christians shouldn't be involved in the political process or government. But when we see examples of that in the Bible, Daniel, Nehemiah, folks like that, what was their purpose? To influence policy or to manifest their faith? To restructure their government or to glorify God and further His purposes?

Acts 23:10 - ¹⁰When the dispute became violent, the commander feared that Paul might be torn apart by them and ordered the troops to go down, take him away from them, and bring him into the barracks.

So, once again, we see these people ready to explode into violence at the drop of a hat. Feels a lot like today and that's not good. Violence is *not* the answer for Christians.

Proverbs 3:31 - ³¹Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways

Now, the Bible does make a difference between vengeance and defense, between attacking and rescuing. We're told to defend our families.⁹ We told to deliver the helpless from the grasp of evil people.¹⁰ But violence as *retribution* or *revenge* is outside the boundaries for Christians and it is not a tool used to accomplish God's plan of redemption.

Acts 23:11 - ¹¹ The following night, the Lord stood by him and said, "Have courage! For as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so it is necessary for you to testify in Rome."

Paul must've been so discouraged that night. No matter *what* he had try to say and do in Jerusalem, none of it had the desired effect. And yet, Jesus *endorses* it! He says, "You testified about Me! Let's do this again!"

How had so few words been a testimony? Well, if we go back just to when he was attacked in the temple and move on from there, we find that Paul *had* shared these truths: That Jesus was resurrected and alive (23v6, 22v8), that God *does* involve Himself in affairs of men (23v22), that Christ forgives sins (22v16) and that His plan of salvation is for everyone (21v21).

Paul's preaching was a lot more than it looked at first. And, as Jesus speaks with him, we see that the Lord's goal for his life was *not* for him to reform the Sanhedrin. It was to present salvation to those God brought in his path. Chuck Smith said that, as Christians, we don't work on commission. You've *been* commissioned to make disciples, not create a new world order. Jesus is going to do that. Our purpose is to testify of Christ and to represent Him in the lives we've been given. If you're in a position like Daniel or Joseph or Nehemiah, perhaps you are able to make a lasting societal change, but that happens when hearts are transformed, not when laws are passed. What law hasn't been broken? Our hope is in the Lord's plan. Our purpose is to courageously testify for and represent Him. Our power is found in the Word. The whole system may be out of order, but we can navigate through with joy, peace, grace and confidence that the Lord will continue His amazing work through us, day by day, trial by trial because our hope and our heading is Christ, not human institutions. He is our Savior, our Leader, our Provider.

⁹ Exodus 22:2-3, Nehemiah 4:13-14, 1 Timothy 5:8

¹⁰ Psalm 82:4