

Paul before the High Priest
Acts 23

Isaiah 40:1-11
Romans 8:1-17
Responsive Psalm 146

This week we are going to be in Acts chapter 23, the last time that we were here in Acts was the account of Paul's arrest and his addressing the mob who sought to kill him. In chapter 22 in Paul's address to the mob he recounts his conversion liking himself to them, one being zealous for the law and he himself was going about gathering up all those who followed Christ and was persecuting them as enemies, and blasphemers. And this was not something he was doing just on his own, but he had letters of permission from the high priest. Paul himself being a Pharisee, taught under Gamaliel, a man of high regard and respect, was at a time no different then those in the crowd who were seeking to kill him for his faith. But Jesus had appeared to him on the road to Damascus, Paul came face to face with the one whom he was seeking out all those who followed to persecute, having Christ revealed to him he could no longer deny that all those who were of The Way, as it was called then, were in fact nothing more then the followers and believers of the promised Messiah.

So now he is using this account to witness to this unruly mob of the one who has come to fulfill all that was spoken of by the law and the prophets. Proving himself to be a Jew, he addressed them in Hebrew, and it says that they became all the more silent. But as we will see in chapter 23 this morning, though Paul appealed to them as a Jew, because he was now one who followed Jesus, they hated him all the more and if it was not for the Roman Commander they would have beaten Paul to death in the streets. Their hatred and anger toward him was such that they would have committed murder, an act which of course was illegal and they would have likely faced the consequences from the Roman government for doing so, but they were so blinded by their rage the only thing they sought to do was to kill Paul.

Today what we are looking at is Paul's first trial, or hearing. The Roman Commander, now knowing that Paul himself was a Roman Citizen is looking to get to the bottom of what had happened the day before, what Paul had done to anger the people so. So he brought the chief priests and their council before him to hear their case against Paul. These last chapters in Acts, read like a story playing out, Luke has taken this moment to slow down his narrative summary of the gospel spread throughout the world and has chosen to take this moment to focus in on this arrest and trial of Paul. But as we will see when we read through this, that even this just like all other accounts before serve to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ further into the reaches of the world, through Paul's arrest he had been given a platform in front of prominent leaders, and the high councils of not just the Jew's but the Roman's as well to stand and give account of his faith, and in doing so bring the gospel to them.

Let us go ahead and read chapter 23, we are going to be looking at the entire chapter this morning. This really was not an official trial, but rather a pre hearing, the Roman commander in Jerusalem was trying to ascertain if Paul was indeed guilty to stand trial, so he invited the Jewish leaders to come forward and testify to Paul's wrong doings. But as we see before any accusations have been made, Paul addresses them again in his defense telling them "I have lived in all good conscience before God." I can only imagine that such a statement would only stand to infuriate them more, for they were seeing him as a blasphemer, as one who was following the one whom they had crucified as also being a blasphemer and a breaker of the law, and now he dares to stand before them and say that his conscience is clear before God?

The High Priest Ananias immediately expressed his rejection to this statement of Paul's when he ordered that those standing near him to strike him on the mouth. From his perspective, neither the claim to have had a heavenly vision, or the claim that Paul's mission was an expression of faithfulness to God could be allowed. Paul was standing before them guilty of blasphemy for speaking in this way, therefore he could not represent himself as a conscientious Jew. It was they who were to judge, not Paul and his conscience as to whether his words, and his deeds were just and worthy. As Christians it is this sort of opposition that we stand against every single day. While maybe not to the extent of Paul, the spirit of rejection, and denial that we face when confronting unbelievers with the truth of the gospel is the same. And not only just unbelievers but sometimes those who make a claim to faith will have the same reaction and rejection, drawing to question your very own faith because you may differ on some point.

This was our experience coming to the sovereign grace understanding of the salvation, having friends and family vehemently oppose us and call into question our very faith. But it isn't what people say that determines truth, it is the bible itself, and the holy spirit working through the conscience of God's people that determines right conduct, and proper faith and belief. On one hand, Paul, and these Jews who were accusing him of blasphemy worship and believe in the same God. Yet the differences in what that belief brings to each of them is the defining factor. Paul's belief that God is all sufficient, and there is no righteousness outside of what Christ has accomplished stands at a stark contrast to those who believe that righteousness is found by keeping a physical law. Though they claim the same God, the outcomes are different, one is focused upon what God has done so that we may be right with him, and the other focuses on what they must do to earn righteousness with God.

I bring this up, because this is the difference between a faith that saves, and a faith that does not. These Jewish leaders here are a prime example of those who may believe in God, but not to the salvation of their souls, for as Paul wrote in Roman's "Though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools." They have become futile in their thoughts, in their attempt to be righteous they only heap upon themselves judgement, for there is none righteous save the Son of God who died so that we may have his righteousness imputed, given, laid to our account. This is how Paul could stand before them, clear of conscience, confident in knowing that he had done as God has instructed, he had ministered as God had given, he is not standing before them, a sinless perfected man, but rather as a sinner saved by the grace of God, whose conscience is clear because of God's work through him. Though they maybe judging him as a blasphemer, Paul stands before them in full confidence that he has lived in obedience before God in his ministry and calling.

And this is just one of the beautiful things about this faith, a clear conscience, and a confidence in Christ. For it is his work, and he who is faithful will by no means fail, or give up. If this faith rested upon us and our ability to be righteous, we would honestly, have no hope. The best that we could hope for would be that in the end our good deeds outweighed our sinfulness, but as James points out, and also the passage in Matthew I keep circling back to it seems over and over again...our deeds, our actions, count as nothing when it comes to righteousness, for it isn't our actions that redeem us, but it is God through faith, and the actions in our lives is the outflowing of that faith. There will be many who stand before God pointing to all that they have done, and he will say.. depart from me for I have never known you, for you were seeking to find righteousness in yourself but I say unto you that even your works are as filthy rags, for in trying to be righteous you have only increased in the sin of pride and arrogance, being haughty and puffed up.

A true faith, a saving faith creates a spirit of meekness, for with it comes the understanding that we bring nothing to this equation, and we must rest and rely fully upon Jesus Christ to stand as one righteous before God. This is how Paul can stand before these haughty, self righteous Jews and make such a claim, for his conscience does not rest in his ability, but rather in what God has done. We also see an example in this account of the opposite of Paul, one who stands in confidence and clear conscience before God and men, and the high priest who in judging Paul as a blasphemer who has broken Jewish law, himself breaks the very law he is claiming to uphold. After the high priest commands that Paul be struck for his statement Paul addresses him calling him out on his own hypocrisy. Here he stands, judging Paul worthy of death for a false, perceived accusation of law breaking and in having Paul struck he himself breaks the law. The cross reference we have in our bibles points to Deuteronomy 25, which says, "If there is a dispute between men, and they come to court, that the judges may judge them, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked. Then it shall be, if the wicked man deserves to be beaten, that the judge will cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence according to his guilt with a certain number of blows."

Paul was not found condemned by the court, he answers back and points out that this Jewish judge who is standing to condemn him for breaking the law, is himself not observing the Law that he claims to be administering. Paul responds with rather harsh language and accusations for the hypocrisy that is blatant. Paul calls him a white washed wall, something that has the appearance of stability but is in reality about to collapse. We get a picture of this imagery being used in (Ezekiel 13:10-16) which says, "My hand will be against the prophets who envision futility and who divine lies; they shall not be in the assembly of my people, nor be written in the record of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord God. Because, indeed, because they have seduced my people saying peace! When there is no peace- and one builds a wall, and they plaster it with untempered mortar- say to those who plaster it with untempered mortar, that it will fall. There will be flooding rain, and you, O great hailstones, shall fall; and a stormy wind shall tear it down. Surely when the wall has fallen, will it not be said to you, where is the mortar with which you plastered it? Therefore says the Lord God; "I will cause a stormy wind to break forth in my fury and there shall be flooding rain in my anger, and great hailstones in fury to consume it. So I will break down the wall you have plastered with untempered mortar, and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be uncovered. It will fall, and you shall be consumed in the midst of it Then you shall know that I am the Lord."

This passage speaking of false teachers and prophets stands as a warning to all those who teach and preach to the people. All those who teach and lead God's people astray will be cut off, will be condemned for it. I feel I must also qualify, that these are those who are deliberate in their lies and false teachings, of course as failable human's we will make mistakes, and we may misunderstand or misinterpret some things of God, it is not those to whom this passage is referring but rather to those who out of malicious intent, or to elevate ones self and seek power, twist, and miss use scripture for their own gains, leading people astray, there will be a harsh judgment visited upon them. Their lies shall be exposed, the beautiful wall they build up and flaunt before man will be revealed as being a lie, and unstable and it is God who will cause it to crumble. And we see here in this passage the answer to the age of question, of why does God allow bad things to happen, or why does not God just save everyone. The answer is he does so for his glory, he says, I will expose the lies, and bring a storm to tear you down, and you will be cut off from my people, and I do so so that you shall know that I am the Lord God.

This was very much Paul's accusation against this high priest, who is bringing false charges against him, and who in the process breaks the very law he is claiming to withhold. Paul likens him to this white washed wall in Ezekiel, a false prophet, a false teacher who will face the judgment of God. Think of who he is accusing of this....the high priest, the one who is held up as a mediator between God and man, and Paul is calling him false and warning that God's judgement will come upon him. And indeed, in AD 66 he was murdered by revolutionaries, because he was a collaborator with Rome. This God is not a God to be trifled with, he is a God who will not be dishonored, nor will he stand for injustice. God is a God of righteousness, justice, and to be righteous and just, sin and rebellion must be punished and it is has either been nailed to the cross and paid in full by Jesus Christ, or it is brought upon the head of those who stand condemned. Yes, God is a God of mercy, a God of Grace, and a God of love, but he is also a God of wrath, and judgment, and vengeance. And in both he is given the glory, for the saving of his people through mercy and grace, and the in the outpouring of his wrath upon those who reject and rebel against him.

God says, "Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; their foot shall slip in due time, for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things to come hasten upon them." There really is only 2 outcomes in God's economy, his wrath will be out poured, and his vengeance will be administered and he shall have his justice against all those who have rebelled against him, and who have not honored him as God. So the reality is, his wrath will either be against you, or against his Son whom he sent to suffer and die for his people. All of scripture points to this reality, you are either of God, and a heir to the kingdom through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, or, you are lost in your sins, separated, cut off, and an outcast who will stand before God in judgment condemned. Scripture teaches that God has a people, who he has set apart, made holy by his own righteousness, therefore redeeming them, cleansing them, and drawing them to himself. The call has gone forth, and is still going forth today...believe and repent, turn from your wicked ways and follow him. Do not continue in rebellion and sin, for that end is wrath, but instead put it all on Jesus, cling to the cross, run to him, the one who has suffered the wrath of God for the sin's of his people. Who has taken the penalty of death that sin brings, and has instead given life, to the one who has taken the hopelessness of this life, and has given a hope for the next.

Do not be deceived that you, like this high priest who was condemning Paul can through some adherence of a moral code or law bring about enough righteousness to save your soul. Even the one who stood as an example, this high priest is guilty of breaking the law that God gave Israel. Self righteousness, is no righteousness before God. Since there is no righteousness to be found in the law, it stands to reason, and is then argued throughout the new testament that the law has passed, faded, and has become obsolete. The law that was given to Moses for Israel, has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ making that old covenant obsolete, for there is now a new covenant bound not by the blood of bulls, and goats and written on tablets of stone, but rather established upon the blood of the Messiah, and written on the hearts of all those who believe. No longer do we need a law instructing us what is right and what is wrong, or even as a moral guide to live a christian life, for we have the spirit of God himself indwelling in us, and it is that which drives us to will and to do that which is pleasing to God. To rely upon the law as a moral code and guide, is to reject the power and role of the spirit within the life of the believer.

Last week when we were in Illinois the Easter message that we heard was taken from Luke, the account of the Disciples on the road to Emmaus, when Jesus approaches them after he had risen. Not knowing who he was, for it was not given to them to see and recognize him, it says that he began at Moses and all the prophets and expounded to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. Moses, and the Prophets all pointed forward to Christ, the new Testament, Revelation, the gospel, everything is fulfilled, and complete in him, all things point to Christ. Then to say, now that we have Christ we can look back to the law is a false understanding of the new birth, the new covenant which is established by Christ, through his blood, and on better promises as the author of Hebrews wrote. The old covenant pointed to a promised land, and an established nation that would be prosperous, the new covenant points to an everlasting kingdom in the very presence of God.

This was Paul's teaching, and this was why the religious leaders in Israel were up in arms against him, for they denied Christ, they denied the promised Messiah who was foretold, and Paul is preaching that Jesus, the one whom they crucified was the Messiah, who had come and fulfilled all making their laws, and the their traditions obsolete. You can see why they would be so upset, and like Jesus before him, would seek to eliminate Paul to protect their own power, and belief. It is interesting is it not, that the very people whom God set apart, whom God took by the hand and lead out of captivity, who had every advantage missed the entire point....and yet, it is exactly for that reason that they sought to have Christ nailed to the cross, in the end being the very ones who were the instrument that God used to bring about the promised redemption that they denied. They were given all these examples, and promises which pointed to Christ, but were blinded by their own self righteousness, that in anger they lashed out against the very one who was promised...but in doing so, they fulfilled all that was also promised to come to pass, as Jesus said to the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus, "Oh foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into his glory? "

We must take Christ's example here, and understand and interpret the old testament through the lense of the new, that is, as the redemption story of Jesus Christ unfolds throughout scripture we get a clearer picture of his work, we ought not to take the latest revelation and revealed truth and run back to the old ways, There is no righteousness to be found in the law, but only through Christ who has laid his righteousness to our account, fulfilling on our behalf what the law has proven we could never accomplish in ourselves. The law condemns, and in the end is a ministry of death with no hope, except that it points to the need for another, for one who is perfect and holy to fulfill all its righteous requirements on our behalf. The high priest could not keep the law, for even in this account with Paul, in his anger toward him broke it, having laid a hand upon an unconvicted man. The high priest, the authority on this earth could not keep the law, Paul who says of himself was the Pharisee of Pharisees, zealous for the law, could not keep the law, in the end the righteous law that was given to Moses by God was given to show that it is impossible for man to stand right before this Holy God. Therefore we needed Christ to fulfill its requirements for us, and in his blood establish a new covenant with us so that we may be found righteous in him.

What a beautiful reality, that we are saved by grace, through faith, and it is not of ourselves but is a gift of God. WE are incapable, unable, unwilling, and downright a rebellious and stiff necked people just as Israel was, yet God comes, grants us faith and repentance, and makes us a new creature who through faith are now capable, able, and willing to believe and follow him. And that call to repent and believe is ever present today as it was at pentecost, as it was in Paul's time, and as it was with Moses and Abraham.

This gospel is life, do you want to be right with God? Then simply cling to Christ, any attempt at righteousness outside of Christ is empty, and stands to condemn for it brings forth arrogance, and pride. To often we Christians as obsessed with creating arbitrary lists for ourselves of rights and wrongs, dos and don'ts, but the reality is that all we truly need to do is rest in the one who has accomplished all of that for us. Cling to the author and finisher of our faith, Cling to the one who was given and died so that you may live. For it is only through him that we have hope.