

Our hope in Christ
Acts 23

1 Corinthians 15:12-58

Luke 12:1-12

Responsive Reading Psalm 70

Last week we started out in chapter 23 with the account of Paul giving a testimony before the Sanhedrin. He was arrested by the Roman Commander who was garrisoned there in Jerusalem who, essentially arrested Paul to save his life for the unruly mob which was whipped up into a frenzy by some Jews from Asia who followed Paul. These are likely the very same ones to seemed to shadow behind him and stir up trouble in every city he had been going to. If it was not for the Roman Commander and his soldiers Paul would have been beaten to death in the streets.

Being held without any charge against Rome, the Commander invites the Sanhedrin to testify against Paul, to bring their argument and account as to why there was such an uprising the day before. As I had mentioned last week, this was not a trial in any official account, but rather it was the Roman Commander trying to ascertain the meaning of this commotion, but now it has become a more complicated situation upon the revelation to Paul's Roman Citizenship. One of the reasons that Rome was as successful as they were in their occupation was their allowance for their subjects to have a sort of freedom of religion. As long as it was not against Rome, but those freedoms were limited, in that the Jewish leaders could not have authority over life and death, therefore they would need to make an appeal to the Roman leadership and plead their case.

This is where we left off last week, the Sanhedrin has come in the presence of this Roman commander and Paul to address the riot from the day before. To which we saw Paul's harsh reply to the High Priest, calling him a white washed wall...something that may look nice from a distance, but in reality is barely held together and is near crumbling, this was in response the the hypocrisy that they were holding Paul as a breaker of the law when the high priest himself had broke it there in their very presence. But we see, in the subsequent verses that Paul backs down a bit, for he says, "I did not know, brethren that he was the high priest." There has been some speculation as to this statement, and why Paul would not have known, the most likely is that since he had been gone from Jerusalem for quite a few years at this point, he wouldn't have known who had taken up that position while he was away, and it was also likely that since this was an informal gathering, he was not wearing his identifying garb, so was unrecognizable to Paul. Paul's sort of stepping back from his initial aggressive stance isn't Paul backing down and cowering, but rather taking a level headed approach in appealing to the Sanhedrin.

He was the one after all who wrote Roman's 12:18, which instructs saying, "Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourself, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." I don't see this here as much as Paul stepping back in his accusations, but rather calculating the best approach not for his own defense but for the sake of the gospel itself. If he was to appear before these men, as one against the high priest and the laws and rulers of Israel then he would in a sense prove their accusations against him and lose the ministry, and testimony of the gospel before them. This is his reasoning for admitting and seemingly backing off on his accusation against the high priest.

Though he is not wrong on one hand, pointing out this hypocrisy, he realizes quickly that such an approach will cut off any gospel opportunity. Even in chains, facing against this group who is seeking his death, Paul stands for the gospel of Christ and his conduct is such as to put the gospel central so that his actions are not merely in his defense against this accusations but as an opening to bring the gospel to all those who would hear.

Which brings us now, to this second part, in verse 6, it says that Paul noticed that some were Sadducee and some were Pharisees, 2 different groups in the understanding of God's working with mankind. The Sadducee's were a very earthly focused group, by that I mean, they denied much of the spiritual realm and understood most things through the lens of physical reality. They followed the law, they believed in God, but that belief was not for salvation but rather that by a strict adherence and keeping of the physical law they could gain righteousness. And that was it, it was very black and white, cut and dried as far as they were concerned. God gave this law, he gave these ordinances and traditions to their fathers, and that is it, that is the end all and be all of God's work with mankind. Where the Pharisee's while also zealous for the law and traditions, who also adhered to them, believing them also the way of finding righteousness before God, understood at least that God could still yet use other, and various means if he so chose. They believed in angels, and spirits, messengers from God who may give special revelation or messages to God's people. Where the Sadducee's denied that God would work that way, and denied the idea of angels and spirits, and also denied the Resurrection from the dead which the Pharisee's also did not. So there is a sense that Paul when he sees this, shifts his defense tactic to bring division between these two groups and cause dissension.

This is a common defense, noticing the weakness of your opponent and exploit it, and in doing so aligning yourself with one side or the other in an attempt to gain favor in your defense. One could argue that is what Paul is doing here, knowing explicitly the differences between the Sadducee and Pharisee, aligning with the one against the other would be a viable, and probably effective strategy in such a case. In fact we see in the text that it caused dissension and an uproar between the two parties, and the pharisees came out in defense of Paul in the end, verse 9, "Then there arose a loud outcry, And the scribes of the Pharisees party arose and protested, saying, We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God. Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them and bring him into the barracks."

I would argue though, that Paul is much more calculating than that, and his acknowledgment of this difference was meant as a vehicle and introduction for the gospel, In various other speeches by Paul, that we will get into here in later chapters he regularly comes back to these theme of the resurrection because it was central to his ministry to Jewish audiences, so as to show the link of the prophetic hope about Israel's future in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and the fulfillment of the prophets concerning the Messiah. In doing so Paul shifts the focus of the trial and accusations against him from an attempt to falsely accuse him of breaking a Roman law worthy of death, to a dispute over theological beliefs and in doing so opens the door for the gospel, and likewise it enables him to challenge the Jews about the true hope of Israel and its fulfillment through Jesus Christ. The contention over the resurrection has been an issue from day one in the gospel ministry to the Jews, in chapter 4 we see a similar event, verse 1 "Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducee came upon them. Being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening.....but look what happened, verse 4, however, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand."

Paul is implying that the hope in the resurrection applies to all true Israelite arguing that Israel's hope is found in the resurrection of Jesus, the promised Messiah, making it possible for all who call on his name to share in the resurrection. This is central to the Christian faith, for without the resurrection, there is no hope. That is why we read 1 Corinthians 15 this morning, talking about the hope in the resurrection, and the centrality of it to our faith. IF Christ has not been raised from the dead, then we are still in our sins, and would have no hope of remission or reconciliation before God. So, it is because of this, that it would seem to me that Paul's mentioning of it here has more to do with gospel outreach and ministry than an attempt to deliberately cause a division for his own defense. Throughout Paul's ministry we see his focus is upon the gospel, even within captivity, even within being imprisoned, and even upon fleeing other cities bringing the gospel to another. Paul's purpose and goal within his conduct as always been about the gospel and he uses the events, or things around him as a vehicle to bring in gospel truths, just as he did in chapter 17, in Athens when he went to the Areopagus, stood before the men there, who as it says, all the Athenians, and strangers who were there spent their days in nothing else but to tell or hear a new thing. And Paul, using this and noticing the religious nature of the people, having various idols to various Gods, including one to the unknown God, he uses this to introduce the gospel.

This was Paul's style in ministry, to bring gospel conversations into every day life by the use of common grounds, or things relevant to the people he was addressing. That is why I argue that Paul here was not merely seeking to cause division for his defense, but rather that this was Paul's natural way of addressing groups of people to bring in the gospel message. In this way Paul stands as an example to us, ultimately in this life there is one truth, and one constant, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and even in this hostile environment Paul stands upon it all the more. If we were to go back and look through the book of Acts again, we would see Paul over and over again being imprisoned, beaten, and driving out of cities, and in one case stoned and left for dead, yet in all that God protected him and in this case it is no different. When God told Ananias to meet with Paul, Ananias was hesitant because of all that Paul had done to those who were the followers of Christ, but God said, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before the Gentile kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake."

From the beginning this was to be Paul's ministry, a ministry of suffering for the sake of the gospel. But in each step of the way God protected him, and lead him through. As we have talked about, through the persecution of Christians by the Jewish leaders, the effect was the gospel spreading across the world, for as Christians fled and went into other countries, they took their belief with them. The very message that was intended to be squashed and destroyed only spread across the world like a wildfire largely because of the persecution, spreading into the gentile world as well. And so it is the same here with Paul yet again, For God said, he will bear my name to Gentile Kings, and the event that is unfolding here is what will bring this about. And look what God said to him, verse 11, of 23, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome." We have also talked before about this very fact, that God's children are essentially immortal until it is their chosen time by God to be called home. We have God telling Paul here to be of good cheer through all of this turmoil, for it will not be his end, but he will be brought to Rome. And it is there in Rome that he was under house arrest and wrote much of the new testament that we have today.

God has a purpose and a plan and I think that is one of Luke's intention of writing the book of Acts. It isn't a mere history book showing the formation of the early church, or merely an account of how the gospel spread to the Gentiles. But it shows God's sovereign hand in the life of Paul, and those around him. It shows suffering for the sake of the gospel, is not only inevitable, but in many ways required. For each of us in our own life if we have not already, or even if we have...will come to a place where our belief and the gospel will cause offense, and all the more as the world around us spirals away from even a decent sense of morality further into darkness. But even this is not outside of God's control, for the light of the gospel shines the brightest in a dark world, as the hopelessness and vile underbelly of this meaningless life is exposed the only hope that there is, is found in Jesus Christ. And he is not only our hope for the life after this one, he is not only our hope in the Resurrection, but he is in this life as well. For a life without him, is fraught in meaningless pursuit of empty entertainment which may bring a sense of joy for a moment but will still leave you empty and without hope. Christ is the only true answer to the age of question of What is the meaning and purpose of life.

To the world, and those lost in it, there is ultimately no meaning or purpose, and we suppress that emptiness through various means, eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. Pursue pleasures, and selfish desires for in the end when you die, it will be all you have right? This is the thought of those who are lost and empty in the world, but we, who are Christs have our fulfillment in him, we can rest in him, hope in him, and rejoice in him. It is not as if all of these other things are bad in and of themselves, God allows us to taste joy here in this life, to have times of peace, times of joy, and they are made all the more joyful because of him who gives them. This is how Paul can say, "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, that is to be shamed, scorned, ridiculed, beaten, down trodden, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned to both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." So many people want to rip this last verse out of its context and use it to justify living or acting in a particular way, but the reality is what he is saying here it is because of Christ that he can live in any circumstance that God puts him in. Whether through moments of peace, and success to which Christ be praised, or moments of suffering and hunger, to which Christ be praised.

How different would you act if the Lord came to you like he did Paul and said, be of good cheer; for in this suffering I have a desire and plan for you. The reality is, that is how we should be acting, for we have such promises from God. He will never leave us nor forsake us, all things work for the good to those who are called according to his purpose, God provides for the birds of the air, how much more precious are you to him then they? We fret, we worry, we become anxious but of all people we should have the least worry, and the least anxiety for as God's chosen people, as his children, we are in the very palms of his hands and there is nothing in this world that can separate us from his love. That though alone should bring joy and hope through all circumstances, even unto death, for death to the children of God is nothing more then the final leg of the long journey home. We have hope in this life, through Christ, we have hope in the next, through Christ. Honestly, what more could anyone ask for? It is through him that we are given a peace that defys understanding, for we rest in him. None of us knows what the future holds, the next hour is just as mysterious as the next day, month, year, of decade. Each and every one of us could look at our lives and think...wow, I would have never thought myself to be in the place that I am right now. We can look back, and see the events in our lives that lead us to here, and we should rejoice for it is God orchestrating our own book of acts.

In writing this book, Luke has given an insight into God's sovereign control through the lives of individuals, his protection, his guidance, and even his hindrance to direct them where to go. And he has done, and continues to do that in each and every one of our lives. We all can stand up here and tell some pretty amazing stories of God's work to bring us where we are today, and in many cases suffering is a part of that journey, but it is not a suffering without hope, for we serve the everlasting, sovereign creator of this universe who chose a people for himself. I often think on that, across the entire universe, through all of space and time....I exist, here, and now..and before the world even was God chose me, who am I that he should care, I am less than a dust mite, less than an atom, in the sea of time....yet God has put me here, in this place at this moment and has worked through my life in various ways to bring me to this point...just as he has each and every one of you. What greater hope, what greater sense of purpose and meaning is there, other than to serve, and praise and worship this God? The God who works all things for his glory, who works all things for his purpose, who works all things for his will, and we....an insignificant blip have been chosen by the infinite and mighty God to be heirs of his kingdom!

As Chaos ensues, as life slowly fades, as time marches on and we become feeble and frail, we can rest in the one who has all things in the palm of his hand, we can rest in the one who has written our story, who carried us through each and every struggle, and hardship...who was faithful when we are not, who loves, when we do not. Each and every one of us knows this reality, each and every one of us here today believes this reality, we know that God is sovereign over all things...as Jesus said, even the very hairs on your head are numbered...there is exactly the correct amount of hair on your head as God has put there....that can kinda change our perspective right? What if your graying hair, or losing hair is ordained by God.....that is pretty much what Jesus is saying here. And if God is concerned about your hair...will he not be concerned about everything else? Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not a single one of them is forgotten before God. Do not fret, do not worry, but rejoice and praise God for you of more value than they.

This was Paul's hope, this is why he can stand before magistrates and kings and unashamedly share the gospel, this is how Paul who had suffered more than we every have, could once again enter into a city to share the gospel, despite knowing that he will be beaten, or imprisoned, or even killed. And he can do so because he is resting upon Christ, knowing and understanding that there is nothing that will happen to him outside of God's will. And we too have the same hope, that no matter what is going on in our lives, or around us we have the one who conquered death, hell, and the grave on our side. We should be known as a people of hope, not of despair, for we have hope in this hopeless world for our hope is not of this world, but of him who is in control of it. Let us rest on him, let us find our shelter in his arms, just as Paul, who in the face of such opposition and aggression did not turn aside from the gospel, but doubled down all the more, as should we, as the day grows darker we should be shining the light of Christ all the more, for in the gospel is found life, hope, and peace, the very thing needed in this dying, hopeless, world of chaos.