

Priority of The Gospel
Acts 23-24

Galatians 6
2 Corinthians 4
Responsive Psalm 124

This morning we are going to be looking at the last half of chapter 23. In the first half of this chapter, we talked about the faith of Paul, and his drive in sharing the gospel. That even while in chains, standing in the midst of his accusers who were seeking his death, because of the very gospel he preached, he still used it as an opportunity to share in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Before that we talked about the hypocrisy of the high priest, who was standing and accusing Paul of breaking the mosaic law, having false accusations that he had defiled the temple, and was to stand in judgment according to the law, was in fact himself a law breaker. The high priest was revered as the head of the Sanhedrin, the ruling head and representative of Israel, the one who once a year would enter the holy of holies in the temple to offer atonement, This was a role of great honor and privilege, but also a great responsibility to upkeep and uphold the law as the representative of the people. And yet, in his anger he unjustly had Paul struck, himself breaking one of the laws, standing as an accuser under false accusations and pretenses when himself being guilty.

As we read this morning the last half of chapter 23, we will see just how far this hatred toward Paul goes, so deep in fact that there were 40 men willing to commit murder, with the help and sanction of the chief priests and elders. So it is not as if in this pre-hearing of sorts the high priest losing his temper and having Paul struck was just a small outward showing of the reality which they had murder in their hearts Their anger was such, that they approved of, and took part in, a plot to have Paul killed. It isn't as though there wouldn't have been ramification of such actions, all those who had been caught would have been punished themselves by the full extent of the Roman law, for they would have taken the life of one of her citizens. But they so hated Paul, that they were willing to even sacrifice their own lives to eliminate him. They were delusional, and blinded by their own hatred and sinful pride that they believed they were doing "God's work" by eliminating this so called blasphemer, believing themselves to have righteous indignation. Taking it upon themselves to be the judge, jury, and executioner on God's behalf.

Let us go ahead and read our passage this morning, since its been a few weeks lets go ahead and start at verse 1, for a bit of a recap. (read 1-35) In Verse 12 is where we see this band of men who swore and oath saying that they would neither eat, nor drink until they had killed Paul. Think of the irony here, a group of about 40 Jews, swore an oath together, before God that they would not rest until they murdered someone, just like the high priest earlier, themselves breaking the very law that they sought to follow. Believing themselves to be righteous and holy justifying murder, rising up against one whom they saw as a threat to their belief, but not only that, Paul was also a fellow Jew himself. So it was also with Christ, he being the promised messiah, the one who was foretold would come to make intercession for mankind, they sought to kill under the same pretenses, and false accusations. Having missed the entire point of the law itself, and in a way proving its very purpose, that no man is righteous, indeed never can be, therefore there is a need for a Messiah. In an attempt to keep the law, it only acts to condemn them, for in defense of this law and covenant, they are devising schemes to murder, themselves fulfilling the purpose of the law, which is to point that there is no righteousness to be found among men, and even in an attempt to adhere to God's holy law, the seemingly most holy of us have even failed.

The adherence to the law had become something entirely different, it had become a point of pride, an means of power, and in reality only showed again that mankind is incapable of righteousness in and of themselves, for even those who strive to uphold the law to its highest degree, are guilty of the law, they are guilty of manipulation, and interpretation and an abuse of it, twisting and contorting it to fit their selfish desires.

Under no circumstance under the law would murder be lawful, yet we see they justify themselves with the idea that they are defending it, they justify themselves to labeling Paul a blasphemer against God and one worthy of death. So the result of this hatred and anger, we see here 40 men who swear by God that they will do just that, and not only they, but with the consenting blessing of those who are the spiritual, and moral leaders of Israel. One thing that this shows without a doubt, is that there is no righteousness that can be found by the adherence of the law, They believed themselves to be just and holy in seeking to eliminate one they saw as a blasphemer, and by doing so breaking one of the chief commandments, you, shall not kill. This is no different then Paul himself as a zealous Pharisee seeking all of those who followed Jesus and also committing murder, under the guise of bringing punishment upon those who were breaking the law and the old covenant. Paul is standing condemned by the very people, for the very same reason that he himself once judged the followers of Christ to be guilty of. So we can see why the law, the old covenant, were such an important issue for Paul and why he spent so much time on it in his writings, For not only has he been the victim of the hypocrisy of those who claimed to follow it, he himself was like them until God changed him on the road to Emmaus, opening his eyes to it's true purpose, and God's holy work of redemption through Christ.

And honestly, Such is each and every one of us until God intercedes. We may think ourselves good people, we may strive to be moral, and just, but none of it amounts to the righteousness that is needed to stand before a just and holy God. For our own morality, our own righteousness without Christ only stands to condemn us, just as it did with the high priest here, and these 40 men who plotted against Paul. In their own attempt to protect the purity of their belief, believing themselves to be righteous, and have the moral high ground, they used their righteousness and morality to justify the murder of Paul. Believing themselves to be standing for God, that striking down this blasphemer is holy and just work, so much so that they would take an oath before God to do that very thing. Righteousness that comes by our own devices ends up being no righteousness at all, but rather often times is nothing more then a justification for our actions, and in an attempt to be righteous and holy it causes us to swell up with pride and arrogance. Sadly, I have known many who claim Christ over the years who are full of such an arrogance and pride, feeling an air of superiority over the lost, as if they themselves are somehow any better, wearing their self righteousness as a badge of honor and in the process of doing so only make that righteousness to be bound in pride and arrogance, making it no righteousness at all, but indeed sin. Seeing themselves not so much as sinners saved by grace, but now as the righteous free from sin standing to condemn. Revealing in themselves this same prideful arrogance of the high priest, believing themselves righteous, but their own self righteousness stands as a condemnation against them.

Proverbs 6 speaks of these very things, as I read a few verses here, notice how many of these things apply to this group who seeks after the death of Paul. Chapter 6, verse 16, "These six things the Lord hates, Yes, Seven are an abomination to him. A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among the brethren."

It would seem that these 40 men, and the high priest and scribes are indeed guilty of pretty much each and every one of these points. Their hatred and drive to kill Paul had no bounds, they were willing to commit murder, and use their own sense of piety as justification in a twisted belief that they were doing God's work by eliminating this blasphemous threat. But of God had other plans, and as he often does, uses the wicked schemes of men to fulfill these plans. It is unclear from the text how Paul's nephew became aware of this plot, in fact up until this point there had been no mention of Paul's family other than a passing mention of his lineage in the previous chapter, saying that he was indeed a Jew born in Tarsus, and later in chapter 22 he says that he was born a Roman citizen.

So we don't know much about this nephew, or how he obtained information on this plot against Paul's life, but he seemed to have privileged access to this Roman Commander. We see two things here, one, that despite his situation being imprisoned, Paul speaks with authority to one of the guards who in turn listens and does as he is told. It would appear that there is at least some evidence of respect toward Paul, and second we see this young man being brought to the commander and it says, the commander took him by the hand and went aside. Denoting again, a sense of respect, even to this young man. There has been some speculation as to how this seemingly unknown nephew of Paul's would have such a sway with the Roman Commander, but there is one thing that I think is important to keep in mind. The Roman's were by no means favored by the Jews, and likewise the Jews to the Romans. We get a sense that the Roman's thought little of the Jewish traditions, and cared little of their law, and after having witnessed 2 riots break out over Paul in which he was almost killed, it wasn't too far of a stretch to believe the information this young man was bringing.

There is also another aspect, many scholars believe that Paul and his nephew received the treatment they did because the commander was looking to make right his mistake in almost having Paul, a Roman citizen flogged. Roman citizens were given certain protections, and being beaten and flogged without being condemned of a worthy crime was one of them, And we can see how serious this mistake was, in verse 29 of chapter 22 after Paul revealed he was a naturally born Roman, it says, "Then immediately those who were about to examine him, (which verse 24 says, examine him under scourging, they were to whip him until he gives a proper account of the turmoil that had arisen in the streets) those men, who were about to whip Paul, withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.

So there is also a sense here where this commander is looking to make right the mistakes that he had made in his treatment toward Paul. He was likely afraid that Paul, being a citizen would complain about being bound, and nearly flogged so was making every effort to right these wrongs. Therefore Paul was given some privileges and respect even among the guards. And we can see this as well with what importance this commander puts in the safety of Paul. Having recognizing that this dispute is likely out of his authority, or maybe not wanting to have anything to do with it, he sends Paul to the ruling governor. But he doesn't just send him with a few guards, but rather he sent him with 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spear men. Such a response shows the seriousness of this situation, We have already seen a riot and unruly mob going after Paul, and we now have a plot containing 40 men who with the blessing of the Jewish leaders were seeking to kill Paul. As far as this commander was concerned, the entire city of Jerusalem was out to get Paul, and again being a citizen was afforded certain rights and protections, enough so that it is speculated that he had sent half of his garrison under his command to escort Paul some 70 miles to the Governor who was in Caesarea.

Just as we have seen throughout this entire book, over and over again, we see God using these outcomes, and the decisions of men to bring about his sovereign will, for this is the first step of Paul being a witness before judges and kings, which God had told Ananias would be a part of Paul's ministry. The letter that this commander sent to the governor giving an account on behalf of Paul, skims over some details, this commander sort of paints himself as a savior of Paul, this Roman citizen who was under siege by the Jews, implying that he knew from the start that Paul was a Roman. Again I think protecting himself, but one of the effects of this account, and this letter to the Governor Felix, is it shows that those who are of the Way, those who follow Jesus are not truly a threat to Rome, they are not a group of rebellious anti-Rome freedom fighters and revolutionaries, but rather are being seen as a variation within Judaism, one which obviously is being rejected and persecuted by the Jewish leadership.

This is actually I think a very important point to make. Rome allowed for a sort of freedom of religion as long as it was not a threat, or was in any way against Rome. Which is something that helped in Rome's success in conquering and maintaining control much of the world at that time. Allowing for various cultures and religions helped to maintain order and peace for as soon as a ruler seeks to oppress those things they give their subjects cause for discontent. The reason why I think this is an important subject to talk about this morning, for it plays in to how Christians live within the world. There are Christians all across the world, living under various governments and rulers and how one lives as a christian under various different circumstance is I think an important topic for conversation. Rome was by no means a just government, but for a time, it allowed for the perfect environment for the gospel to spread across the world. There have been many studies done about this subject, how with the road system that Rome had installed, also creating a relatively safe environment for travel aided in the spread of the gospel throughout the world.

The important distinction to make here, can be found in Paul's actions and responses. Though he is a Jew, though he is a Roman, he is first and foremost a follower of Christ. And his conduct shows the rulers who were over the region that his beliefs are not one which holds a threat against Rome, first and foremost is the importance of the gospel ministry, and one who is rebellious and a trouble maker does not make a good witness for the gospel. One of the reasons Paul wrote in Roman's as much as is dependent upon you, live in peace with all men is for this very reason, for the sake of the gospel. Sometimes though it may not be necessarily wrong to stand up to a corrupt and evil ruler, if it is the gospel that will suffer for it, then as Christians we need to assess how it effects the ministry. The Church in China is a good example of this, for years there was relative peace, the Chinese government allowed for state sanctioned churches, which was necessary to hold a church in China, but for a time China, like Rome did not see Christianity as a threat, in fact they were seen by the government as good citizens for a long time.

Then a few years back arose the issue of Hong Kong, who was independent but China was making claims and seeking to rule and control over it...so for a while we had the Hong Kong protests that were being televised and reported across the world. And though, they were not wrong, many pastor's and churches stood with the people of Hong Kong against a corrupt tyrannical government seeking to gain control and oppress the people....the result? China turned on the christian churches, started arrested the pastors and leaders, and I remember reading in one case began bulldozing down the building a church was meeting in, while they were meeting, being forced to flee and go into hiding. And this is why I think that this is an important topic for discussion, for though in many ways one can argue that these churches and their leaders were not wrong in standing against the injustices of China, the cost was their freedom to witness the gospel freely.

That is why it is important to remember and be mindful that first and foremost no matter where we may find ourselves we are citizens of God's kingdom, and we should conduct ourselves in such a way that the gospel message is first and foremost.

This is why I have never been comfortable with churches getting involved in politics, as a people, who live in a country that we have been given a right to have our voices heard through voting and various other means it is not wrong to be involved, or to stand against some of these evils we are seeing in our society. But I think it is wrong for a church organization to become a political action committee, the church's roll is the gospel ministry, to strengthen and build up one another so that we maybe effective ministers of this gospel. And in many ways, it is the gospel that effects real and true change within a culture. The reality of what we are seeing in our culture today, is nothing more then the effect of a generation of ineffective church ministry.

The church in many ways have lost its salt, and light, being more concerned in a form of pious morality, and being a form of weekly self help conferences, having turned away from the gospel ministry to focus upon the outward life of the individual the church has lost it's power, and as the church wanes, sin and corruption take hold. Just as Jim was saying last week, there is a spiritual warfare going on that we really don't even understand to what extent, and many so called churches are sleeping on the front lines. And just how churches years ago moved away from the gospel to focus upon physical, outward things...so to now they are seeking to wage this spiritual war with physical outward things. Putting their focus upon political figures, as the answer to this sin and corruption we see across our land. When in reality the true answer, is not a political party, or certain individuals, but it is the gospel ministry, standing for the truth of God's word against the darkness of this world. And it is this that should be our focus as Christians, it is this that should be our focus as a church in Holland Michigan. To stand as a lighthouse in the darkness, to be a refuge of hope, in a lost and dying world. The proclamation of the Gospel is the only truth that will effectively change the hearts of mankind. It is the only message that can bring hope and life in this backward, upside world of darkness and despair.

And we are the messengers, we have been given this hope not only for ourselves, but to bring and share to others. This gospel, this ministry needs to remain front and center of our church, and of our lives, let us stand as a beacon of truth and life, shining forth across the land of the dead, so that if God wills, some may be quickened and believe.