

ACTS 23:1-25:12: TRIALS

We all experience trials in life, but not trials that are actually trials like this.

Acts 23: Paul's Defense before Jewish Council

Read 23:1-11. Paul said his conscience before God was clear. The high priest Ananias considered Paul's confession a lie and ordered him to be slapped. Paul tweeted back, "God will slap you, you whitewashed wall! You judge me according to the law while breaking it." Someone said, "How dare you speak to God's high priest like that." Paul's reply was like a sarcastic apology. (A whitewashed wall is a metaphor for hypocrisy.) Paul called out the hypocrisy of the high priest while apologizing for not respecting his authority. Paul was human, a sinner saved by grace.

So WWJD? Paul was imitating Christ, Matthew 23:27-28, 33: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness... You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?"*

This is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This is Jesus calling out and condemning hypocrisy. Here are two stanzas of a poem written by Charles Wesley:

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child;
Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to Thee.

Lamb of God, I look to Thee,
Thou shalt my example be;
Thou art gentle, meek, and mild,
Thou wast once a little child.

We've all had to deal with hypocrisy in other people. How do you point out the hypocrisy of a person in authority over you? Do it respectfully and try to avoid angry sarcasm. There's a time for sanctified sarcasm and satire.

Paul purposefully threw the Council into confusion by turning two religio-political parties (Sadducees & Pharisees) against each other by siding with one party and its beliefs. Paul was a former Pharisee. Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, angels nor spirits. This means their belief precluded the existence of spiritual bodies after death. Sadducees were like our theological liberals who deny the authority of scripture. The Pharisees believed in resurrection and spiritual bodies. Paul took the focus off himself and got them arguing over their beliefs. It was a divide and conquer strategy. Smart!

(You're on trial before Congress and you say, "I believe in cutting taxes and regulations to stimulate the economy" and the Democrats and Republicans start arguing. The Dems argue, "We believe in raising taxes and imposing more regulations on businesses!" The Republicans respond, "We believe in cutting taxes and reducing regulations to grow the economy.")

Jesus visited Paul: 23:11: *The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."*

This is the third time Jesus appeared to Paul: conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), flee Jerusalem and go to Gentiles (22:18), encouragement to stay in Corinth and preach and disciple the believers (Acts 18:9-10), and this comfort and guidance in Jerusalem (23:11).

There are times I would like to have the LORD stand beside me and tell me His plan. We do have the Holy Spirit which is better according to Jesus John 16:7: *"Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you."*

Jesus' plan was for Paul to testify in Rome. The remainder of Acts tells us how Jesus got Paul safely to Rome to bear witness for Him. If Jesus has a purpose for you to be somewhere and do something for Him, then He will get you there. Don't sweat the details. Do your part and trust Him.

23:12-22: A plot to murder Paul was overheard by his nephew. This isn't mere coincidence or an accident. God was behind this. God had Paul's nephew in the right place at the right time. (This reminds me of the OT story of Esther. God is not explicitly mentioned, but He is obviously behind the scenes creating circumstances according to His will.) We will all experience

circumstances in our lives that are created by God even though they don't say "Made in Heaven." They are not random events but God's purposeful work.

23:23-35: Thank God for Roman law and order! God used it to save Paul. Paul was accompanied to Governor Felix in Caesarea by 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen. They could have easily killed the 40+ Jews who wanted to murder Paul. Because they made a vow not to eat or drink until they murdered Paul, they probably all died of dehydration and starvation (23:12). They would have been too weak to fight the Romans anyway.

Acts 24:1-25:12: Paul's Defense before Governor Felix

Attorney Tertullus 24:1-9: Felix was the Roman governor. At the trial the high priest Ananias and his attorney Tertullus presented their case. Tertullus the attorney engaged in lawyer-talk. He used insincere flattery and then bore false witness against Paul. He made false accusations which is a violation of the 9th commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Tertullus made three accusations and Paul made his defense (**24:10-21**).

Accusation #1: For we have found this man a troublemaker, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world.

Paul's defense: "You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me." Paul wasn't the person who stirred up riots; it was the angry Jews.

Accusation #2: He is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He referred to Messianic Judaism as "the sect of the Nazarenes" and tried to identify it as an illegal political movement.

Paul's defense: "But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust." Paul emphasized the Jewish roots of "the Way." Paul

said he worshiped God and believed the Law and the Prophets. The one truth Paul bore witness to in every defense was the resurrection of Christ.

Accusation #3: He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him.

Paul's defense: "Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia—they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me." Paul said the reason he came to Jerusalem was to present offerings to his nation. Paul said the Jews from Asia caused the riot, not him. Where are they?

As a prosecutor, this attorney had no evidence, no witnesses; therefore, no legitimate case.

Note: WWJD did not work here. Paul defended himself. Jesus did not defend himself. He answered direct questions, but that is all He did.

Paul used every opportunity to witness; he engaged in personal evangelism to Felix and his Jewish wife Drusilla.

Acts 24:24-27: ²⁴ After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity, I will summon you." ²⁶ At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So, he sent for him often and conversed with him. ²⁷ When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

Paul told him to put his faith in Jesus Christ. Paul reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment. (This is what every politician needs to hear.) Felix was frightened. Felix feigned interest in the gospel. He had no intention of believing it. Felix did a lot of "licking boots" to get his position with its power and money. Felix was a former slave who rose to power by showing skill and pandering to his superiors. Roman historian

Tacitus wrote of him, “He occupied the office of a king while having the mind of a slave, saturated with cruelty and lust.” Felix knew Paul was innocent, but he was waiting for a bribe. He had Paul under house arrest for 2 years! [The word of a coming judgment frightens people and could lead to repentance and faith. It is the work of the HS to convict about righteousness and judgment. Read John 16:7-11.]

25:1-12: Paul’s Defense before Governor Festus

The Jewish chief priests wanted Festus to set up Paul’s trial in Jerusalem. Their purpose was to murder Paul on the way there. The Jews went down to Caesarea and made many false allegations against Paul they could not prove. Never make an allegation unless you have the proof! *(Democrats say Trump’s legal team is making false allegations of voter fraud without proof. They have the proof, hundreds of eyewitness affidavits, videos of stuffing fake ballots, ‘white-hat’ computer hackers who have found Dominion voting machine algorithms switching tens of thousands of votes from Trump to Biden. The problem is corrupt politicians like Governors Felix and Festus who refuse to see and act on the evidence.)*

Jesus told Paul, “You must testify to the facts about Me in Rome.” The only way for Jesus’ word to be fulfilled would be for Paul to use his Roman citizenship to appeal to Caesar. (We, American citizens, appeal to our Constitutional rights.) What made Paul appeal to Caesar was the threat to be sent back to the murderous Jews. Do you see how Jesus accomplished his purpose? Jesus uses secular government and even the schemes of evil men to accomplish His purpose.

Key verse: 25:11-12: *Paul said, “If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.” Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”* This would be like taking your case all the way to SCOTUS.

Here is a modern trial that parallels what Paul experienced. It involves false accusations and a group of extremists, but protection from secular government. Asia Bibi was accused of blasphemy. Paul was accused of

bringing an uncircumcised Gentile into the Temple and defiling it. This accusation was like blasphemy. Fanatical Muslims tried to murder Asia Bibi. A group of fanatical Jews made a vow and tried to murder Paul. After 10 years in prison Asia Bibi was acquitted of the charges by the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Paul was saved by the Roman government due to his Roman citizenship. Both were saved by secular governments.

Freed at Last: A Cup of Water, A Death Sentence, and an Inspiring Story of One Woman's Faith by Asia Bibi and a French journalist.

Asia said, "I became a prisoner of fanaticism." This was also true of Paul.

Blasphemy is the greatest crime in Pakistan. It carries the death sentence by hanging. (If the fanatics get you then they will behead you.) The Pakistan penal code (295-C) says: *Whoever by words, spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet, Muhammed shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine.*

Asia lived in Punjab, Pakistan, with her husband and 2 daughters. It was over 100 degrees in June. Asia was a poor farm worker picking berries in a field. She drank water from a cup used by several Muslim women and in kindness offered to pour water for them. They accused Asia of defiling the cup and drinking water just by touching it as a Christian. (Just like Paul was accused of defiling the Temple by allowing a Gentile to enter it.) The women who accused her were looking for an excuse to "settle a score." She said to the women, "Everybody should live together in peace. It was true for Jesus and for the prophet Muhammed." The women accused Asia of blasphemy. The village *mullah* (mosque leader) offered to drop his complaint if Asia would recant her Christian faith leave her husband and become Muslim. She refused. The Muslim women beat her and her daughters. When she asked for water they urinated in a cup and gave it to her. She was arrested and put in prison where she was chained, beaten, and threatened with death. After almost 2 years in the prison a court sentenced her to death by hanging based on the testimony of the Muslim women. Asia was not permitted to make a defense. She waited in prison for 8 more years as her case was appealed.

Two politicians in Punjab were assassinated for defending her. The governor of Pakistan's Punjab province was assassinated in 2011 for trying to pardon her. A Christian cabinet minister who advocated for changing the blasphemy law was murdered. The lawyer who took her case to Pakistan's Supreme Court had 24-hour armed guards. In 2018 her conviction was overturned, but fanatical Muslims protested and threatened to kill her.

The Roman government saved Paul from Jewish fanaticism. The Pakistani government saved Bibi from Muslim fanatics who would have killed her if she weren't in prison.

Asia and her husband and daughters are now safe in Canada, but they still fear being murdered by fanatical Muslims wherever they go.

On Monday, Dec. 7, 2020, the US House of Representatives passed on a 386-3 bipartisan vote House Resolution 512, calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy and apostasy laws.

If you are ever on trial for your faith in Christ, then remember this:

Read Luke 12:8-12. Jesus said the HS will give us what to say when we stand before government officials and bear witness for Him. Be prepared, but leave room for the HS to speak through you.

Luke 12:8-12: "And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

I'm sure Paul prepared, but not knowing what the accusations and charges would be he also relied on the Holy Spirit to teach him what to say.