

LECTURE 23

This week's chapter outlines very nicely into five parts:

1) **confinement** 2) **confrontation** 3) **comfort** 4) **conspiracy** and 5) **convoy**. In addition to focusing on the sequence of events of chapter 23, I also want to look at the **reactions** . . . the **attitudes** . . . the **emotions** of the people who are under various forms of stress.

First of all we have Paul. He's in **confinement** . . . a prisoner. We remind ourselves that he's probably very near 60 years of age. Last week Acts 22:30-31 told us, "The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, the dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar." He'd been dragged, nearly killed, and rescued only by being arrested. Graciously, he'd been given his chance to speak and give his testimony to the Jews, but that only resulted in further mob violence. Then in prison he narrowly escaped flogging by claiming his Roman citizenship.

Yes, he'd been warned this was coming. Yes, he was determined to go to Jerusalem anyway, and yes, Paul was no stranger to difficulty. But where were the Christians in town? Where was support from the church leadership? Don't you think Paul might be a little discouraged in his circumstances at this point? Think about yourself . . . when you're

up to your neck in physical problems and dire circumstances, what is the one thing you want most? O-U-T!

There are a lot of things we could say about the value of suffering like “suffering validates our faith;” or “character cannot be developed into its strongest and most beautiful form without it.” Perhaps the poem by Annie Johnson Flint expresses it well –

Pressed out of measure and pressed to all length;
Pressed so intensely it seems beyond strength;
Pressed in the body and pressed in the soul;
Pressed in the mind till the dark surges roll;
Pressure by foes, and pressure by friends;
Pressure on pressure, till life nearly ends.
Pressed into loving the staff and the rod:
Pressed into knowing no helper but God.
Pressed into liberty where nothing clings;
Pressed into faith for impossible things;
Pressed into living a life in the Lord;
Pressed into living a Christ-life outpoured.

Paul was pressured. He’d obeyed the elder’s advice and now he was confined in the prison cell. Trapped in circumstances that had no foreseeable way out. What’s the greatest danger when we feel trapped by circumstances in life? DESPAIR! We have only to think of the

young man who committed suicide last week because he couldn't take the stress at school. Did you know that they teach beginning art students that when painting a forest or densely wooded scene to always show a path through the woods? Otherwise the viewer sees depression and despair that could affect the sale of the painting. I'm not saying that Paul was at that point of despair, but we can certainly recognize that he was feeling stress and pressure.

Then we have the Tribune, Claudius Lysais. He's frustrated . . . he's hassled . . . things are going from bad to worse. He's not having a very good week to say the least! He'd rescued Paul from the angry crowd, come close to disaster in flogging a Roman citizen and he still had the problem of what to do with the prisoner in his custody. What do you think he wanted at this point in time in the midst of turmoil? PEACE AND QUIET! (Notice how those two always go together?) His primary responsibility was to keep the peace. He wanted to keep his job, but if this situation developed from riot into revolution, he could lose not only his job, but also maybe even his life!

Christians know the real meaning of peace because we know the Prince of Peace. Peace to the mind of Claudius was absence of conflict. I remember a story about a man boasting to his friends that he took his wife to Rome for the 40th wedding anniversary. Friends thought that was great. They asked, so what will you do for your 50th? "I'll go back and get her." That's one way to have a decade of peace.

The commander faced a dilemma. To preserve the life of this Roman citizen, he should probably keep him in custody. And in order to keep him in custody, he should at least have charges. So “to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews,” Claudius opted for **confrontation**. He called a meeting of the Sanhedrin, released the bonds from Paul and let him stand before them.

The Council, as you know, was made up of 70 Jewish leaders. Since Paul was once a Pharisee, not only by birth (the son of a Pharisee) but by belief, he knew they were divided into two groups: 1) Sadducees who were the minority group that rejected everything to do with angels, spirits, demons and the resurrection of the dead. 2) Pharisees, who were larger in number and more influential. I have a book in my library titled *The Pharisee’s Guide to Holiness*. It’s about legalism and what others would like to impose on you as a standard of holiness. They adhered to the Torah as well as the Jewish oral traditions and they believed very much in the supernatural and the resurrection of the dead.

You would think this might be a great starting place for Paul to begin his testimony. After all, if you can find something to agree upon in theology, you can begin to expand your Christian witness from there. Had Paul begun, however, by defending himself as a Christian, he could expect to be shouted down. Instead, he called them “brothers” – putting himself on equal footing with them.

They knew Paul and who he was. He'd been gone from the Sanhedrin over 20 years. To their way of thinking he was a defector from the true faith and when he claimed to have a clear conscience about his actions, Ananias, the high priest, had him slapped in the mouth.

Stop and think about Paul's statement of having a "clear conscience." That's a pretty amazing statement even today to declare a clear conscience. It's only a Christian who can truly do that because they are clear from their past – they have a position of righteousness in Christ – and with daily confession of sin, we have continual fellowship with the living Lord. Sins are removed as far as the east is from the west and we know from Romans 8:1 that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Paul was physically hurting from the beating of the mob, certainly not treated gently when strung up for flogging, now slapped . . . Paul's response was an angry outburst (albeit a righteous anger). He called Ananias a whitewashed wall, or in other words, a hypocrite!!

Mentally glance off to the side of the room for a moment . . . what do you think Claudius' reaction was? Do you think he snapped to attention and thought to himself, "Oh no, not again!" This confrontation idea was not solving his problem, it was only becoming more explosive.

Don't you find that's the usual course of events in angry situations? It gets worse before it gets better. In fact, I've read that in eastern cultures they spar verbally with all the hateful vocabulary they

can muster up. The first one to strike out physically is the loser because it indicates he can think of nothing else to say.

So what is the answer in these situations? A return to SELF-CONTROL. Paul is quick to regain his and accept the rebuke for insulting the high priest. Though an officeholder dishonors the office through his conduct, one does not have liberty to dishonor him. Exodus 22:27 says, “Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people. So Paul had respect for the office even if he had contempt for the man holding it.

Now Paul had to think fast on his feet. It was obvious he was not going to get a fair hearing. You know, it’s not easy to think fast when you’re in a perilous situation. But he needed to buy some time and if he could get them arguing among themselves over their age-old theological questions, he could get some breathing room. It kind of like a duck who looks calm and serene floating on a lake, but under the water he’s paddling like crazy. You’ve heard it before, but the poem about the optimistic frog applies . . .

Two frogs fell into a deep cream bowl,
One was an optimistic soul;
But the other took the gloomy view,
“We shall drown,” he cried, without more ado.
So with a last despairing cry,
He flung up his legs and said, “Good-bye.”
Quoth the other frog with a merry grin,

“I can’t get out, but I won’t give in.
I’ll just swim round till my strength is spent,
Then will I die the more content.”
Bravely he swam till it would seem
His struggles began to churn the cream.
On the top of the butter at last he stopped,
And out of the bowl he gaily hopped.
What of the moral? ‘Tis easily found:
If you can’t hop out, keep swimmin’ round.
That’s what Paul was doing . . . swimmin’ around.

Well, the dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees became so violent Claudius had to step in and take Paul from them by force back to the barracks. So ended any hope the tribune might have had of getting to the bottom of the matter by legal, rational, and sensible means.

You think about Paul. For years he had hoped to give fruitful witness in Jerusalem. But when he arrived, he found a compromising church full of legalistic believers who held him suspect because of his contact with the Gentiles. His dreams of effective testimony to the Jews lay in ashes at his feet, and his vision for successful witness in Rome began to fade too. Paul was physically tired – emotionally spent – maybe even wondering if he was in God’s will. Had he heard the Spirit right? Should he have listened to the disciples in Tyre? Even the most optimistic person can experience a low after a battle (remember Elijah?),

and Paul was in the depths. Sometimes we get so discouraged fighting the battles of the Christian life. Doubts creep in. We've all experienced that, haven't we?

Then in verse 11 the Lord Jesus Himself came to say these words to Paul . . . "Take courage!" When was the last time you as an ambassador of Christ told a hurting Christian to take courage? I could go on and on about the ministry of encouragement . . . how important it is in my life and the benefits I've seen personally in the lives of others. It takes so little time to act on the promptings of the Holy Spirit and put those good thoughts into kind words. Sometimes you'll never know what it means to others. Over the years this Bible Study has come along side me to help with really tangible needs as well as prayer support and it has done the same for many of you. We need each other . . . we need to be there for each other . . . to lift up, bear with, encourage each other.

Jesus assured Paul he is going in the right direction and that he will testify in Rome. Now no matter what Paul has to endure, he's refreshed and revived by the words of the Savior. Have you let Him refresh you with His Word?

Psalm 119:50 – My comfort in suffering is this, your promise renews my life.

Job 11:18 – You will be secure because there is hope. You will look about you and take your rest in safety.

Matthew 28:20 – and surely I will be with you to the very end of the age.

When we're resting on the promises of God, sometimes it's great just to wait and see what new opportunity disguised as a challenge the Lord will set before us.

Well, a **conspiracy** developed in which 40 Jews took a vow called a "cherem." It literally means, "May God curse me if I fail to do this." You know their plan . . . send for Paul to reappear before the Sanhedrin and ambush and kill him on the way. The fascinating twist to the story is that Paul's nephew found out about it. We know nothing of Paul's family directly from Scripture . . . whether or not they were believers – just this tidbit of revelation that he had a sister and a nephew. (Some say that to be a member of the Sanhedrin Paul was probably married and had a child, but that's not in the Scriptures.) Since Paul was a Roman citizen, his visiting privileges while under arrest were more liberal than other prisoners. We have nothing but a guess as to the age of the nephew, but presumably he was a young man old enough to recognize danger and relay the message in detail. Paul sent him to Claudius.

Claudius received Paul's nephew with kindness. We see in verse 19 – he took the young man by the hand and drew him aside. He listened with courtesy. Are you as kind and courteous a listener to the young people in your life? They too may be trying to communicate matters of life and death, especially in this day plagued with all kinds of social evils and pressures. We can take a lesson from this Roman Tribune and be willing to heed the warnings God brings before us.

Now Claudius certainly did not want to explain to his superior the assassination of a Roman citizen in his charge, so he decided to send Paul with a **convoy** of 470 soldiers. This was nearly half of the fortress garrison and more than ten times the number of conspirators. The sixty-mile trip to Governor Felix in Caesarea left at nine o'clock at night. The city gates would be opened to let this military force through and then would close again, making pursuit virtually impossible until the gates opened again in the morning. We can well imagine the disappointment of the assassins as this strong force clattered out of the city. So much for their vows and plans to murder Paul. Caesar himself could not have been better protected.

Barclay tells us that Felix had begun life as a slave. His brother, Pallas, was the favorite of Nero. Through the influence of Pallas, Felix had risen first to be a freedman, and then to be a governor. He was the first slave in history ever to become the governor of a Roman province. Tacitus, the Roman historian, said of Felix, "He exercised the prerogatives of a king with the spirit of a slave." He was completely unscrupulous and was capable of hiring thugs to murder his own closest supporters. It was to face a man like that that Paul went to Caesarea.

The letter of transfer sent with Paul acknowledged that Claudius found "the accusations had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him deserving death or imprisonment." We notice how Claudius tried to make himself look good to this superior by

making it seem he'd rescued a Roman citizen from the mob when, in fact, he did not know that until he almost had Paul flogged. But it's human nature, isn't it, to want to look good to others? The important thing is how we look to God. He can see the thoughts and intents of our hearts.

Felix decided to hear the case and wisely waited for Paul's accusers to arrive from Jerusalem. That would take five days. Meanwhile Paul would WAIT and REST.

The elements of this lesson are often present in our own lives. We may face **confinement** in the form of serious disability or illness. We may be in the midst of **confrontation** within our family, circle of friends or the place where we work. We may be in a place where we either need **comfort** or have opportunity to comfort another. Certainly every Christian daily faces the **conspiracy** of Satan to undermine our Christian walk and testimony – the enemy is dangerous and active. And lastly, the **convoy** . . . we have a destination. It is in the Lord's timing when we will arrive. Meanwhile, we're protected by the full armor of God – we're to stand firm with the belt of truth buckled around our waist, the breastplate of righteousness in place, our feet fitted with readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, the helmet of salvation in place and the sword of the Spirit (the Word of God) ready to use to disarm the enemy.

Several years ago a speaker at one of our Insight for Living chapel meetings said he'd asked a goldsmith how hot the gold must get in the

fire before it's ready for use. The answer was, "Until I can see my face in it." The fires of your tribulations need to reflect the face of Jesus.

Each one of us will face some sort of challenge in this next week – its called life. Are you secure in knowing that Jesus has gone before you . . . and that He will be the Rock under you . . . and the guiding light inside you? Times of pleasure or times of pressure – times of serenity or times of stress – we need to carry the thought of Isaiah 41:13 with us – "For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, 'Do not fear; I will help you.'"

Let's pray – Lord, you gave Paul the message, "Take courage." Let us remember you give us the same message. We trust You for that provision. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions?