

## 38. Be of good cheer

May 4, 2014

I don't know about you, but I've done and said a few really, really dumb things in the past that I wish that I could take back and wipe away from everyone's memory including my own.

When I realize what I have done or said was not a right thing to do for a follower of Christ, the guilty feeling and self-criticism gets far stronger and deeper in my heart. The only comfort is that our God is so gracious and so merciful to forgive us if we only come to Him and confess our sins.

*Lamentations 3:22-23 Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. 23 They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.*

From chapter 9 of the Book of Acts, we've been following the aging apostle Paul since he came to know Jesus as his Savior and Lord on the way to Damascus. We went on three missionary journeys with him and learned a lot of truth from the Lord through this godly man. When he came to Jerusalem, he had to be taken to the Roman barracks which was located inside of the Antonia Fortress due to the murderous riot against him.

This morning we will see the apostle in his prison cell with a heavy heart and distress. He desperately needs someone to encourage and strengthen his spirit. He did not know that he was about to have a very special Visitor. I believe that the same Person who visited Paul in that prison will visit us and speak to us very soon.

### A. PAUL THE ROMAN CITIZEN

*Acts 22:24-29 the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him. 25 And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?" 26 When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman." 27 Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." 28 The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." 29 Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.*

From now until the end of the Book of Acts, Paul will be in Roman custody. As far as this Book is concerned, this was the end of his time as a free man, though not the end of his witness or his usefulness to God and God's people.

The Roman Commander Claudius must have been shocked that this little Jewish troublemaker who spoke Aramaic and Greek was actually a Roman citizen. Paul was an extremely rare individual. It was uncommon to find such an educated, intelligent, and devout Jew who was also a Roman citizen. God would use this unique background to use Paul in a special way, even as He wants to use your unique background to use you in a special way.

## **B. THE SANHEDRIN DIVIDED**

*Acts 22:30* The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them.

*Acts 23:1-10* Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." 2 And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?" 4 And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" 5 Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" 6 But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" 7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. 8 For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection--and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. 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." 10 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.

Throughout the Book of Acts, Dr. Luke, the author of the Book, refers to the Sanhedrin simply as "the Council." Twenty some years ago, Paul had been a member of this judicial council which was made up of about seventy men, including the high priest. They wrote laws and made judgments based on their interpretation of the Mosaic Law. It was much like the current Supreme Court we have.

There were two main factions which divided the Council: the Pharisees, to whom Paul had belonged, and the Sadducees. Though the Pharisees were legalistic and upheld their oral traditions as highly as the written Law of God, they believed in angels and bodily resurrection of the dead.

However, the Sadducees, on the other hand, had no room for oral traditions and were rejecting the supernatural altogether – including the hope of a resurrection. They were much like the modern day liberal Christians, if you can call them Christians, because they do not believe in the inerrancy of Scriptures, the deity of Jesus Christ and many other core doctrines of Christianity.

One thing in common between the Pharisees and Sadducees, they both loved their traditions and the power they had, much like the politicians in Washington.

The day before Paul saw a great opportunity go unfulfilled when the crowd at the temple mount did not allow him to finish his message to them, but started rioting again. Now Paul had another opportunity to win Israel to Jesus, and perhaps a better opportunity. Here he spoke about Jesus to these most influential men in Israel.

But the process didn't go as well as he wanted from the beginning. The order to strike Paul by the high priest was completely against the Mosaic Law since he was not

charged with anything officially. By the way, the high priest Ananias should not be confused with the high priest Annas in Acts 4:6. Ananias was so corrupted that he even stole the funds for himself that belonged to the common priests.

In response to this illegal act and order, Paul lashed out in his anger in v3. Now, a question might arise in your mind, "How could Paul not recognize the high priest if he was a member of this Council Sanhedrin previously?" I don't believe that Paul was lying when he said, "I did not know."

Remember, he was a member of this Council twenty some years ago. The term of the Jewish high priest used to be a lifetime, but when Herod the Great became a king, he started appointing high priests as he wished. And the kings after him did the same. When Paul was working for the high priest before his conversion to Christianity, Annas was the high priest, not Ananias.

Besides, all these Council members had long beards and mustaches, were wearing similar robes and turbans. They all looked alike, like the Oriental people.

Whatever the reason, the damage had been done. In a heated moment, Paul had said the wrong thing to the wrong person, lost his opportunity to receive a fair trial, and, most importantly, blown his chance to explain the Gospel. As a result, the situation became very ugly, very fast, and Paul now had to think fast just to stay alive and the Roman Commander had to come to rescue him again. This is becoming a habit.

### **C. BE OF GOOD CHEER**

*Acts 23:11-24 But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome." 12 And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. 13 Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. 14 They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul 15 Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near." 16 So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17 Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him." 18 So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you." 19 Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside and asked privately, "What is it that you have to tell me? 20 And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. 21 But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you. 22 So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me." 23 And he called for two centurions, saying, "Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night; 24 and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor."*

Back in prison, Paul sat alone, drenched in guilt. He had a perfect chance to bring the message of Gospel of Jesus Christ, but he completely blew it because of his own outburst of anger. Feeling he had let down his Lord so badly, how could he go on?

Can you feel his pain? At moments like this, a believer is often tormented with a deep sense of unworthiness and un-useableness before the Lord. Perhaps Paul thought that this was the end of his ministry. He thought it was over for him.

Guess what, Paul? You have a Visitor – Jesus your Savior Himself. Jesus' physical presence with Paul was a unique manifestation. But Jesus promised every believer to always be with them.

*Matthew 28:20b* lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Rather than delivering Paul out of the prison cell miraculously like before, this time, the Lord met him in the prison cell. "Be of good cheer " simply means "Take courage."

We often demand that Jesus deliver us out of our circumstances, when He wants to meet us right in them. We sometimes think we are surrendering to Jesus when we are really only demanding an escape. God wants to meet us in whatever we face at the moment.

The Lord assured Paul that his ministry was not over and would continue to Rome. How invigorated he must have felt! The timing of this promise was especially precious. It didn't look like Paul would get out of Jerusalem alive; much less make it to Rome. God not only knows what we need to hear; He knows when we need to hear it.

While Paul was sleeping soundly, there were forty Jewish assassins who determined to kill Paul stayed awake and planned their scheme. They probably thought that they were these invincible Jewish Ninjas. These men lacked nothing in commitment or zeal. But zeal and devotion by themselves never prove that someone is right with God. Good examples are Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Islam Jihad fanatics.

Think about this? How was it possible that Paul's nephew happened to overhear the assassination plan; somehow he was able to enter the heavily guarded barracks to tell Paul; then a centurion was willing to take him to his commander as Paul requested; the busy commander listened to him right away and believed him; then the commander ordered a small army to escort Paul out of town under cover of darkness. It was completely by the providence of God.

470 trained Roman soldiers which was a half of the Roman Antonia Fortress garrison in Jerusalem would escort Paul out of there. It was as if God wanted to exaggerate His faithfulness to Paul, and show him beyond any doubt that the promise of Jesus was true.

Can you picture those 40 assassins, from a roadside, waiting for Paul to come by with a handful of soldiers, but here comes 470 armed soldiers with Paul riding a horse more like a king than a prisoner? As they passed by these assassins, I wonder if Paul waved his hand at them and praised the Lord for His goodness and faithfulness. Then as the sound of the soldiers' footsteps faded away, these assassins could hear their empty stomachs growling loudly.

I like what St. Augustine said, "Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to His love, and the future to His providence."

#### ***D. APPLICATION***

**The grace of God can overshadow any guilt within us, and the power of God's providence can overcome any plot against us.**

All of us who struggle to keep calm under pressure, who tire of waiting, and who feel hatred's burning fire within needs to remember this.