

Text: Acts 23.1-5

We move into Acts 23 today.

Our passage today involves a sharp confrontation between Paul and the high priest of the time, Ananias son of Nedebeaus. Herod Chalcis (younger brother of Agrippa I) appointed Ananias to the office in AD 47. The marks of his ten years (or so) in the office were cruelty and corruption. We'll talk more about him in a moment.

In our passage, Paul will make a very strong denunciation of Ananias, then seemingly back off the strength of his denunciation when he learns Ananias is the high priest.

Let's read the passage and get the sense of it.

Read Ac 22.30-23.5, text 23.1-5

What are we to make of this exchange?

On the surface, we might think the passage contradicts some of the things I've taught from other passages (including our message last Sunday) about our relationships to authority.

Paul seems to talk back to authority, then to back down. Is that what is happening? Was he right or wrong to do what he did? What if Ananias wasn't the high priest? Would Paul's strong response be acceptable then?

Part of our problem in answering these and other questions is that we can't read tone into the text. Some commentators speculate that Paul is sarcastic at points, but we can't prove that.

However, believing that Paul is right when he said, "All Scripture is profitable..." (2 Tim 3.16), we are going to look into this passage and glean what we can for further instructing us about our own relationships to authority.

Do You Revile God's High Priest?

Proposition: The Christian ethic under pressure must surrender to God's law.

"Ethic" = "a set of moral principles: a theory or system of moral values ... the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group"¹

¹ "ethic" in Frederick C. Mish, ed., *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

Restated Proposition: Christian morals under pressure must surrender to God's law.

I. The personal ethic: good citizenship (1)

A. A casual detail: Paul's piercing look — "looking intently at the Council"

1. One commentator: "Paul 'sized up' his audience (Witherington 687)."²
2. Another: "the earnest gaze was to see if he recognized any faces that were in the body ... to which he apparently once belonged."³
3. This detail doesn't come much into our message
 - a. Our passage deals with the high priest
 - b. As we carry on, we will see his careful consideration will bring this hearing to an end

B. Paul's comprehensive claim

1. Conduct before his conscience

a. The term "conscience" precedes "lived my life" in Gk

Lit. "Men brethren, I with a completely good conscience have conducted my public life before God until this day."

b. "Conscience" is somewhat personified, as if it is something outside of himself – his conscience is his witness

c. Paul is well aware that his conscience cannot justify him, only Jesus can do that

d. Nevertheless, he makes a bold appeal based on the testimony of his clear conscience

2. Conduct as a citizen – "lived my life"

MyTrans: "my public life"

a. The word is Greek, and is connected with politics

² L. Scott Kellum, *Acts*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2020), 259.

³ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ac 23.1.

b. Yet the concept has a Jewish sense

“The Israelites had a particularly vivid awareness of their place in their people’s tradition and law, of what they called *politeuesthai*, ‘living as a citizen’; which leads to personal behavior that is conformed to the common law, a nuance of public life. In this sense, St. Paul proclaims before the Sanhedrin: ‘I have lived before God with a clear conscience,’ observing the laws of the divine *politeia*.”⁴

3. Paul will make similar claims

a. To Felix

Ac 24.16 “In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men.

b. To the Philippians

Phil 3.6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

4. The Jewish law dominated Jewish life

a. The Pharisees in Judah specially emphasized a whole-life commitment to the Law

b. All Jews, even if not Pharisees, found their lives dominated by legal requirements

Paul’s claim is bold: nothing in his life accuses him before God.

“Such a remark was itself something of a provocation. If Paul’s life as a Christian left him in complete innocence before God, then the Sanhedrin members who did not share his commitment to Christ were the guilty parties.”⁵

⁴ Ceslas Spicq and James D. Ernest, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1994), 131–32.

⁵ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 468.

II. The abusive incident: blow and blowback (2-3)

A. The high priest's command: Strike him! (2)

1. The words not given, nor the description of the blow
2. The action in keeping with what we know of historical character

"Ananias ... brought no credit to the sacred office."⁶

"Ananias ... had a reputation for being insolent and quick-tempered."⁷

"Josephus painted Ananias as a despicable person."⁸

- a. Political appointee of Herod Chalcis, as mentioned earlier, AD 47
- b. Held office for 11 or 12 years (date of this hearing about AD 57)
- c. "Josephus tells how his servants went to the threshing floors to seize the tithes that ought to have gone to the common priests"⁹
- d. Summoned to Rome around 5 yrs earlier to answer charges of corruption, but cleared and restored by Claudius
- e. Very wealthy, very influential even after deposed from office
- f. Used violence and even assassination to get his way
- g. Pro-Roman policy earned resentment

B. Paul's response: God will strike you! (3)

1. Paul's prophecy: "God is going to strike you"
 - a. When the war with Rome broke out, AD 66, he was pro-Rome as mentioned
 - b. Insurgents captured him and put him to death — God's blow fell 10 years after this hearing
2. Paul's insult: "you whitewashed wall"

⁶ Bruce, *Acts*, 425.

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 669.

⁸ Constable, *Expository Notes*, Ac 23.2.

⁹ Bruce, *Acts*, 425.

- a. Unique term in NT
- b. Similar term, used by Jesus (Mt 23.27) — 'whitewashed tomb' — referred to the uncleanness of the Pharisees, though they had a respectable appearance
- c. This term seems related to Ezek 13.10-12
 - 1) A whitewashed wall is made up of rotten wood, but coated with a fresh coat of paint or plaster
 - 2) The wall cannot stand, but it looks solid

Ezek 13.10-12 "It is definitely because they have misled My people by saying, 'Peace!' when there is no peace. And when anyone builds a wall, behold, they plaster it over with whitewash; ¹¹ so tell those who plaster *it* over with whitewash, that it will fall. A flooding rain will come, and you, O hailstones, will fall; and a violent wind will break out. ¹² "Behold, when the wall has fallen, will you not be asked, 'Where is the plaster with which you plastered *it*?'"

- d. The point is: You seem secure but you will fall
3. Paul's reason: You sit in judgement according to the Law, yet you break the Law

Lev 19.15 ¶ You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly.

III. The crucial detail: bowing to God's law (4-5)

- A. The bystanders point out the identity of Ananias (4)
 1. They challenge his strong words against the high priest
 2. They imply Paul's conscience should accuse him, after his boast of a good conscience (1)

3. They used the term “God’s high priest” [lit. “the high-priest of God”]

“But the bystanders were shocked: that was no way to speak to the high priest. They do not appear to have been so shocked by Ananias’s outburst, although that was no way for the high priest to speak.”¹⁰

B. Paul’s modifying response (5)

1. “I was not aware” — which raises questions, “Why not?”

- a. The hearing is before the Council
- b. The chief priest chairs the Council
- c. The chief priest *may* wear distinctive garments (not necessarily so on this occasion)

One wonders why Paul *didn’t* recognize the high priest.

2. Proposed solutions

- a. Paul didn’t hear who issued the order [weak]
- b. Paul’s eyesight isn’t good, he couldn’t see who gave the order [weak]
- c. Paul reacted impulsively, without thinking about the high priest’s position [weak]
- d. Paul speaking ironically, as in, “he isn’t acting like a high priest” [maybe – but hard to read tone, therefore weak]
- e. Paul was long absent from Jerusalem, wouldn’t have known for certain identity of high priest [possible]

3. Implication of response: I would have spoken differently, because of the Law, which he quotes

Ex 22.28 ¶ “You shall not curse God, nor curse a ruler of your people.

C. Some observations for application

1. When unjustly treated, we can make legal appeals

- a. Paul does here: “you command me struck contrary to the law”

¹⁰ Bruce, *Acts*, 426.

b. Jesus also:

Jn 18.21-23 “Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; they know what I said.”²² When He had said this, one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, “Is that the way You answer the high priest?”²³ Jesus answered him, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?”

2. Nevertheless, despite the wickedness of office holders, God expects us to respect the office
 - a. The high priest *is* the rule of God's people
 - b. The law *does* forbid speaking evil of the ruler

“A key point is that Paul ultimately submits himself to the law here.”¹¹

“Now that the focus was on the role, Paul made clear that he respected the office. He even quoted Exod 22:28 to underscore that he did respect God's representatives in accordance with the Torah. He was a law-abiding Jew in every respect.”¹²

Conclusion:

Proposition: The Christian ethic under pressure must surrender to God's law.

Restated Proposition: Christian morals under pressure must surrender to God's law.

It is quite common to speak disrespectfully of our leaders. They aren't leaders of the theocracy, as in the OT, but we aren't animated by the flesh anymore, but the Holy Spirit.

Right?

How would the Holy Spirit expect us to interact with even evil rulers?

¹¹ Bock, 670.

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, 469.