

Text: Ac 23.8-11

This afternoon we will look at the same text as this morning, but I want to turn to some details I brushed by as we worked through the morning message.

Read Ac 23.6-11, text 8-11

Our text is one of the key references giving us information about the difference between Pharisees and Sadducees.

The fact that Sadducees deny the resurrection is also referenced in the Gospels in the famous exchange over the Sadducees' trick question:

Read Mt 22.23-34a

The resurrection in general, and the resurrection of Jesus in particular, is an essential part of the gospel. Paul says of the resurrection:

1 Cor 15.16-19 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised;¹⁷ and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.¹⁹ If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

Thus, a crucial point of the Christian gospel is a point held in common between Christians and Pharisees — a point of contact for the gospel, in fact.

“A Sadducee could not become a Christian without abandoning a distinctive theological tenet of his party; a Pharisee could become a Christian and remain a Pharisee — in the apostolic age, at least.”¹

This is straightforward enough, but there is something in our text that causes confusion among the commentators. Verse 8:

Ac 23.8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.

The question is: where do the Sadducees deny an angel or a spirit? Both occur in the Pentateuch, which was the only part of the OT they accepted.

In piecing out this puzzle, we find a powerful thread in our text which elevates the gospel message Paul preached.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 428.

Proposition: The resurrected Lord spoke to Paul, commissioning his witness to Jerusalem, Rome, and the ends of the earth. We carry that commission.

I. The denial of the Sadducees (8)

A. A brief description of the Sadducees

1. Very little documentation: NT, Josephus, some Rabbinic texts (all negative)
2. Mostly composed of priests (but not all priests) but held high priesthood in NT era, thus controlled the temple
3. Pro-Roman, thus opposed to anything that would overthrow their place
4. Major theological differences with Pharisees
 - a. Denied resurrection (and any reward or retribution in afterlife)
 - b. Denied Pharisaic determinism, emphasized free will
 - c. Rejected Pharisaic oral traditions
 - d. Accepted Pentateuch alone as having final authority
 - e. May have differed over some purity issues

They were “sad, you see” — Marvin Lewis

B. The denial of our text: “no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit”

“No extrabiblical text speaks of such a complete denial of angels and spirits by the Sadducees. In fact, the Pentateuch, which the Sadducees held as authoritative, affirms the existence of such beings.”²

1. Various explanations offered by the commentaries
 - a. The simplest: Luke is right, though no one else mentions this point
 - b. Four or five other explanations that are very complicated to understand (would only serve to add confusion in our message)

² Bock, *Acts*, 671.

- c. The next simplest (and possibly most likely) is a grammatical solution
2. No ... nor ... nor = two subdivisions of one category
- a. No resurrection
 - b. Neither as an angel (a “bodied” being)
 - c. Neither as a spirit (a “disembodied” being)

“It is possible, and grammatically likely, that the μήτε ... μήτε cstr. are subsets of ‘resurrection.’ The sg. ἄγγελον seems misplaced if referring to the messengers of heaven. It could refer to a resurrection either in a body, like an angel, or as a spirit.”³

Some research in the Gk lexicons seems to confirm this for me — BDAG: “a preceding negated item is divided into its components by more than one μήτε foll.”

Polhill: “A final possibility is that the reference was a further elaboration of their rejection of the resurrection—they rejected an afterlife in an angelic or spiritual state.”⁴

II. The implicit testimony of the Pharisees (9)

- A. Paul’s outburst gathers support from a seemingly unlikely source: some of the Pharisees

We find nothing wrong with this man

- 1. The Pharisees, of course, had much conflict with Jesus and subsequently the apostles
- 2. Nevertheless, over time, some of these came to faith in Christ

³ Kellum, *Acts*, 262.

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 470.

B. The reason for Pharisaic support

suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?

1. Where would Paul have claimed “a spirit or an angel” spoke to him?

Ac 22.7-8 and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’⁸ “And I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.’

Ac 22.18 and I saw Him saying to me, ‘Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.’

Ac 22.21 “And He said to me, ‘Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

2. What was it that Paul claimed spoke to him on those occasions? —
The resurrected Jesus
3. What did the Pharisees ask here?

suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?

a. Suppose a resurrected spirit...

or

b. Suppose a resurrected angel...

In other words, this expression means “a resurrected person, whether in spirit form or angelic [bodily] form”

The question of the Pharisees implicitly testifies to the message Paul proclaimed.

III. The explicit testimony of Jesus (and Paul) (and us) (11)

A. That night, the Lord “stood at his side”

1. We spoke of Paul’s possible doubts after this difficult day
2. Here, now, is that resurrected angel standing at his side, reaffirming his commission to the apostle Paul

B. Paul's commission

1. You solemnly witnessed to me in Jerusalem
2. You must solemnly witness to me in Rome, also (before Nero)

Consider: if Paul had gone to Rome on his own, would he likely have witnessed to Nero?

Compare:

Ac 1.8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

C. The apostolic commission our commission

1. The apostles began in Jerusalem
2. They proclaimed the message in all Judea and Samaria
3. They went to the ends of the earth
4. Their message came to us
5. Their message is our message

Conclusion:

Proposition: The resurrected Lord spoke to Paul, commissioning his witness to Jerusalem, Rome, and the ends of the earth. We carry that commission.