

Text: Acts 23.24-35

Our passage to conclude Acts 23 contains some interesting bits and some insight into human character. However, there isn't much to make a sermon on in the material we have yet to go over.

My plan is to work through the text and explain the material Luke reports for us, and then step back and look back at the progress of the gospel so far in the book of Acts. I'm going to use the vision of the Lord that Paul had earlier in the chapter to set this theme.

In our chapter, we see setback after setback for Paul's ministry. We don't have one instance of anyone responding positively to the gospel message.

Such responses are disheartening.

What is the biggest problem keeping Christians from evangelism? The negative responses they've experienced (or that they fear) — these are demotivators.

Suppose you knew that you would get a 50% response rate for a gospel witness? Would you find the negative responses so challenging?

What if it was one in four, a 25% positive response rate? I think that would still be quite encouraging.

Back in my real estate days, I would sometimes do a direct mail campaign, stuffing mailboxes with sales literature of some sort. Someone told me that direct mail outfits look at a 1-2% response as a success.

What if you knew that out of 100 people you witnessed to, 1 or 2 would respond positively? Would that be enough to keep you going? Maybe.

What is our real response rate? I really don't know, but it seems much worse than 1 or 2 %.

However, as we look back over church history we see a remarkable historical result.

According to Mr. Google, 31.1% of all people in the world today are "adherents" of Christianity, almost 1 in 3.

Now, of course, in our view, many of those people wouldn't be serious Christians, some are "nominal" ... their parents were Christians, their country is officially Christian, etc.

Nevertheless...

When Christianity began, even if you count say 1000 early adherents (those in the upper room at Pentecost, others [500 brethren whom Jesus appeared to at one time, see 1 Cor 15], etc.) what percentage of world population would that be?

According to Wikipedia, estimates for world population in AD 100 range between 200 million and 300 million people. Taking a midpoint, that would make roughly 1000 initial Christians represent .0004% of the population.

From .0004% to 31.1% is a remarkable success story, although many of the 31.1% are only nominal Christians.

As we look at the responses of Acts 23, we can take stock of the responses throughout the book so far and find encouragement in the power of the gospel to reach lost souls.

Read Ac 23.22-35

Testifying before Men

Proposition: We must take heart to testify, for there is spiritual power in the testimony.

I. The continuing indifference and antagonism of unbelief

A. The spiritual condition of Claudius Lysias

1. Tribune in charge of Jerusalem, arrested Paul
2. Ordered Paul scourged as method of interrogation
3. Sent Paul to the Council to ascertain charges
4. Ordered transfer to Caesarea and Felix for decision
5. Sent a "cover letter," revealing his own heart
 - a. The cover letter (a statement of the case) part of his legal requirement (called an *elogium*)

Note: commentaries speculate whether Luke had access to the letter itself, or just made an educated guess as to contents. What we have *sounds* genuine, so in some way, Luke had access to a copy.

- b. The letter follows "conventional forms."¹

¹ 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), 267.

- c. We learn tribune's name from letter
 - 1) Lysias – Greek name, likely became his *cognomen* when he gained Roman citizenship
 - 2) Claudius – Roman name, likely taken as his *nomen* in honor of the Emperor who granted the citizenship
- d. The letter puts the circumstances in a favorable light (our word: “spins” the truth)
 - 1) He claims to have rescued Paul (the Jews likely would have killed Paul if he hadn't intervened)
 - 2) He implies he rescued Paul after learning he was a Roman (but he didn't know this until after ordering the flogging)
- e. He has little understanding of the charge against Paul (28-29)
 - 1) Note his great indifference to the matters under discussion
 - 2) Likely had a translator with him during the Council scene
 - 3) No real curiosity to discover the significance of the discussion

This is where so many people are in our world. They aren't really antagonistic to Christianity, they just don't want to bother with it. They want to live out their lives for their own ends.

- 6. In his indifference to the issue, he sends Paul to Felix, protecting his own future by judicious description of the facts
 - a. Sends Paul under guard, taking into consideration the facts
 - b. The soldiers take Paul as far as Antipatris (fortress built by Herod the Great, about 35 mi fr. Jerus.)
 - c. The foot-soldiers return, the mounted force takes Paul rest of way

B. The spiritual condition of Felix

- 1. Felix is the governor, but one with an unflattering reputation
 - a. Formerly a slave, brother of another elevated slave who was a favorite in the emperor's court

- b. Likely liberated by Antonia, the mother of Claudius
- c. Served as procurator in Judaea from about AD 52-59
- d. He was ambitious, marking progress through three successive wives (all princesses)

“The first of the three was a grand-daughter of Antony and Cleopatra; the third was Drusilla, youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I, who figures in the following narrative.”²

- e. He has a bad reputation in history:

“Claudius entrusted the province of Judæa to the Roman Knights or to his own freedmen, one of whom, Antonius Felix, indulging in every kind of barbarity and lust, exercised the power of a king in the spirit of a slave.”³

2. Felix inquires of Paul’s origins

- a. Taking into consideration the letter remanding Paul for trial
- b. Ascertaining jurisdiction, decides to hold Paul over for trial with his accusers present

3. Felix will later hear in depth from Paul

Ac 24.24-25 ¶ But some days later Felix arrived with Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul and heard him *speak* about faith in Christ Jesus.²⁵ But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, **Felix became frightened** and said, “Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you.”

Felix is an example of those who understand well the message but will not repent, though they know the gospel pronounces judgement against them.

² F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 436–37.

³ Tacitus, *Complete Works of Tacitus*, ed. Moses Hadas, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (New York: Random House, Inc., 1873), *The History*, 5.9, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:phi,1351,004:5:9>.

C. The spiritual condition of the Jewish Council

1. Ananias orders someone to strike Paul before he can give a defense, let alone before the Council finds him guilty (23.2)
2. The Council erupts in uproar as they debate the resurrection question (23.10)
3. The Council joins the plot to murder Paul on the way to another hearing (23.14-15)

Here we see implacable opposition to the gospel. As earlier noted, these men knew of Christ, knew the miracles, saw the evidence of power in the ministry of the apostles, *and* rejected it all.

- They represent those who are antagonistic to the truth of the gospel and seek to tear it down.

In light of indifference and antagonism, why do the apostles persist?

II. The contrary evidence of widespread belief and growth

- A. The testimony of James: “many thousands who have believed” (21.18-20)

Ac 21.18-20 And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ After he had greeted them, he *began* to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it they *began* glorifying God; and they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law;

- B. Notice however, v. 19 — “the things which God had done among the Gentiles”
 1. The great church of Antioch
 2. The churches in Crete (Paul and Barnabas, 1st missionary journey)
 3. The churches in Galatia and surrounding areas (1st missionary journey)
 - a. Perga in Pamphylia

- b. Antioch of Pysidia
- c. Iconium
- d. Lystra
- e. Derbe

4. The churches in Greece (2nd missionary journey)

- a. Troas in Turkey
- b. Philippi
- c. Thessalonica
- d. Berea
- e. Believers in Athens
- f. Corinth

5. The churches in Asia (3rd missionary journey)

- a. Ephesus and surrounding region (seven churches of Revelation 2-3)
- b. Miletus
- c. Tyre
- d. Caesarea (Philip the evangelist)

6. And of course, we know there is a church in Rome itself (see book of Romans)

C. The growth of the church in the Holy Land

- 1. Pentecost
- 2. Healing of the lame man
- 3. Scattering of the church after persecution
- 4. Samaria (Philip)
- 5. Ethiopia (eunuch and Philip)
- 6. Regions of Judaea (Philip and Peter)

Ac 8.40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

- a. Peace in the church “throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria” (9.31)
- b. Peter traveled to
 - 1) Lydda, healed Aeneas
 - 2) Joppa, raised Dorcas
 - 3) Caesarea, preached to Cornelius

My point: we see no positive reception of the gospel in Ac 23, but look at what we have seen through the course of the book.

III. The controlling imperative of our Lord Jesus Christ

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.”

Mt 28.19-20 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

- A. The Lord sent his apostles on a mission
- B. The Lord conceived that mission as incremental and universal
 - 1. Progressing by increments
 - 2. Filling the whole earth

Conclusion:

Proposition: We must take heart to testify, for there is spiritual power in the testimony.

The secret of growth is the message.

Some will hear it with indifference.

Some will hear it under conviction and seek to escape.

Some will hear it with rage.

And some will hear and believe.

Jn 1.12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name,