



PAUL AND POLITICIANS: BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 22:30–23:35

46th Message

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Late last year, when a Chinese pastor named Wang Yi anticipated he would be arrested as part of the state's war on independent Christian churches, he wrote a letter to be published after his detention. When it was released following his arrest in December, his message rocked the Christian community globally, opening new conversations about Christians' role in corrupt power structures. He wrote,

I accept and respect the fact that this Communist regime has been allowed by God to rule temporarily. As the Lord's servant John Calvin said, wicked rulers are the judgment of God on a wicked people, the goal being to urge God's people to repent and turn again toward Him. For this reason, I am joyfully willing to submit myself to their enforcement of the law as though submitting to the discipline and training of the Lord. At the same time, I believe that this Communist regime's persecution against the church is a greatly wicked, unlawful action. As a pastor of a Christian church, I must denounce this wickedness openly and severely. The calling that I have received requires me to use non-violent methods to disobey those human laws that disobey the Bible and God. My Savior Christ also requires me to joyfully bear all costs for disobeying wicked laws.¹

So, what is our relation to structures of power in society? If Jesus reigns as Lord of the world, what does that imply about how we relate to the governing authorities? Paul seems very clear on the subject. In his letter the Romans he wrote,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. . . . Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. (Rom 13:1–2, 5 ESV)

But what happens when those institutions become corrupt instruments of evil and submission enables further injustice? After WWII, we rightfully condemn those who carried out Hitler's abominations with the excuse that they were just following orders. So our responsibility must entail more than mere submission. Today we will glimpse Paul's views on society's power structures, and we'll discover how the kingdom advanced in a very imperfect and often corrupt world.

If you were with us last week you'll recall that in this final section of Acts, Paul the *evangelist* becomes Paul the *apologist*, defending his teaching (i.e., what Paul teaches is not apostasy from Judaism, but rather its fulfillment), and the integrity of his character (i.e., he is not a revolutionary, but a law-abiding Roman citizen) in five trials. The journey will take Paul from Jerusalem, to Caesarea and finally to Rome.

Paul's first defense took place in the temple after he was falsely accused of desecrating it and the Roman military commander (called the "tribune") rescued him from an angry lynch mob. Motivated by a deep love for his people, Paul asked to speak. The crowd was stunned when they saw the prisoner, bloodied and beaten, escorted to the

platform overlooking the temple, and even more surprised when he addressed them in Aramaic, their native tongue. In a rhetorical masterpiece, Paul told the story of his upbringing, education, and unimpeachable zeal as chief persecutor of the church. The crowd listened attentively even when Paul spoke of his encounter with the risen Christ, which gave him a new understanding that the fulfillment of Israel's hopes and dreams comes through the resurrection of the person of Jesus, who is now reigning as Israel's Messiah and Lord of the world. It wasn't until Paul mentioned a second vision he had in the temple detailing his commission to the Gentiles that all hell broke loose.

The scene is not without humor, as the poor tribune, who is in charge of the situation, can't speak Aramaic and therefore doesn't know what Paul said or why the people were shouting. With his patience cracking, he ordered Paul to be brought back to the barracks to be flogged to get to the truth. As the centurion stretched him out to be whipped, Paul played his trump card—his Roman citizenship, which struck terror in tribune's heart. "Binding a citizen without good reason was a punishable offense, preparing him for torture would be worse," as Cicero earlier wrote, "To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination."² Suddenly the tables are turned, as the tribune finds himself on the defensive.

I. Paul Stands Before the Sanhedrin (22:30–23:11)

A. The judge and judged (22:30–23:5)

But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day." And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?" And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" (22:30–23:5)

To the tribune's credit, despite tumultuous difficulties, he remained determined to discover the **real reason** (lit. "to know with certainty") for the violent reaction to Paul. If this was purely a religious matter, it was the Sanhedrin's responsibility to clarify the charges before formal accusations were placed. Therefore as the one tasked with keeping the peace, the tribune ordered the Jewish council (Sanhedrin) to hold a pretrial hearing to determine the "the real facts" of the case.

If the tribune was optimistic about discovering the facts of the case through rational dialogue, the opening salvo dashed his hopes. As Paul enters the chamber, tensions hit fever pitch. Awkward silence

looms as the council glares at Paul with dark disdain and Paul stares boldly back as an innocent man with nothing to hide.

As a former Pharisee and [most likely] a member of the Sanhedrin (Acts 22:20; 26:10), Paul, addressing the council as “my brothers,” spares the formalities and boldly affirms his integrity: “I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.” The verb *politeuomai*, translated “live,” is derived from the root *polis* (“city”) and means “to be a citizen, take part in government, conduct one’s life.” In the perfect tense the verb denotes fulfillment, which the NIV attempts to capture in its translation, “I have fulfilled by duty to God.” Paul’s claim that he has maintained “a good conscience to this day” does not imply he has never done anything wrong but rather, whenever he did err, he immediately did what was necessary to make it right.

This infuriates the high priest, who violates the law and orders his colleagues to strike Paul on the mouth, signifying that Paul was blaspheming. F. F. Bruce labeled Ananias as “one of the most disgraceful profaners of the sacred office.”³ Governed by greed, he had no qualms about plundering the temple offerings intended for the priests and making lavish bribes for his own advancement. True to his character, Ananias orders Paul to be struck before he was even charged with a crime. Paul, being well educated in the law (Lev 19:15), confronts this evil.

How are we to judge Paul’s actions? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught “To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also” (Luke 6:29). But Paul did not turn the other cheek, as Longenecker contends,

Paul’s retort seems quite out of character for a follower of the one who “when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats” (1 Peter 2:23). Paul, it seems, momentarily lost his composure—as evidently Ananias hoped he would—and put himself at a disadvantage before the council.⁴

But other scholars (Keener and Wright) suggest Paul wasn’t hurling an insult, but rather solemnly denouncing a vile and violent action. Just as Israel’s prophets pronounced judgments on Israel’s wicked leaders, so is Paul calling the one who struck him to account to the law he is called to uphold. “If you are ordering me to be struck contrary to God’s law, God will strike you. You are like those false prophets of Ezekiel’s day who plastered over Israel’s sin with whitewash, crying ‘peace, peace,’ and everything looked fine until the moment the wall collapsed.”⁵

When Paul is told that he is addressing the high priest, he confesses he did not recognize the one who struck him as the high priest. It may in fact be the case that Paul, out of contact for over 20 years, did not know which council member was the high priest. However, because “Paul speaks of him as ‘sitting to judge’ [and] that he issues orders that those standing near Paul obey...a majority of modern commentators appear to think that Paul does in fact know that Ananias is the high priest.”⁶ F. F. Bruce suggests his statement could be ironic: “I did not think that a man who acted so disgracefully could possibly be the high priest.”⁷

Quoting the law (Exod 23:28), Paul “is quick to apologize—for the sentiment, but because it was expressed to someone whose office ought to be respected...Paul respects the office, though clearly not the present holder of it. Paul thus manages to hold together two things which people often find difficult. On the one hand, he certainly will respect the office. Without that, chaos will come.”⁸ Yet respecting the office also includes our solemn duty and responsibility

when those structures become systems of injustice to respectfully remind those in authority, whether it be a president, congressman, judge, CEO, manager, policeman, husband or father that God will call them to account for their actions.

B. Divide and Conquer (23:6–10)

Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. (23:6–8)

Once Paul realizes he would not get a fair hearing from a judge who has pre-determined his guilt, rather than cowering in submission, he goes on the offensive to “divide and conquer.” Seeing the council was split politically and theologically, Paul “decides to release his biggest cat into a room full of self-important pigeons. ‘Resurrection!’ he shouts. ‘That’s what this trial is all about.’”⁹ The hope of the resurrection and the thought that God will one day set the world right would be a rallying cry to the Pharisees; but it was an anathema to the Sadducees, not only theologically in their denial of the supernatural (Luke 20:27), but also politically. The Sadducees included the leading priestly families and represented Judaism’s wealthy aristocracy. Since they sat at the top of the food chain, they collaborated with Rome to preserve their power and political survival and opposed all threats to it.

Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees’ party stood up and contended sharply, “We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?” And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks. (23:9–10)

Paul’s strategy works like a charm, dividing the council like a hot knife through butter. The Pharisees rally behind him, pronouncing Paul innocent, which in turn unleashes a violent counter attack by the Sadducees. The two factions square off like wrestlers in a tug of war with Paul caught in the middle—one side seeking to kill him, the other attempting to pull him to safety. As Keener notes, “Although his strategy proves effective, it also proves dangerous: after Paul divides the council, he is nearly ‘divided’ himself.”¹⁰

For a third time the tribune must rescue Paul. But this time there is progress, as Paul’s brilliant strategy brought to light the “real facts” of the case—that is, Jews’ consistently violent reactions to Paul rest solely on theological grounds and not any breach of Roman law.

II. The Lord Stands with Paul (23:11)

The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must (*dei*) testify also in Rome.” (23:11)

If any of you have ever experienced physical violence, you know that when the adrenalin wears off, darkness and overwhelming trauma can descend. It’s hard to imagine how Paul endured not one, but three violent attacks within two days. I’m impressed that whenever God breaks the silence and condescends to speak to us, his timing is impeccable and his words, though few, are dense with meaning. The vision comes in the night when darkness reigns, the time when

we are most prone to doubt and discouragement. Before speaking, the Lord draws back the veil between heaven and earth and “stood (*ephistēmi*) beside him,” making his presence palpable. When someone is fully present with you in your suffering, the comfort is so complete they hardly need speak a word.

Then comes the voice. “Take courage,” or better “be encouraged,” is God’s first word, spoken like a parent who couldn’t be more proud of their son or daughter. The human heart always needs encouragement, but effective encouragement must be based on reality, not wishful thinking. I’ve found that when people are suffering, they are keenly discerning about reality and the worst thing you can do is give them false hope or, worse still, platitudes based on simplistic theology.

By contrast, God’s words are tested and true, a solid foundation for encouragement. The first reason Paul should be encouraged is God’s unqualified praise for the “solemn testimony” he gave about God in Jerusalem. Given the results Paul experienced, we would most likely be discouraged and feel like we weren’t good enough. But the Judge himself testifies to the truth and faithfulness of Paul’s testimony. As Keener observes, “Contrary to familiar ways of thinking, witness can be important for God’s plan even when it is ignored or rejected.”¹¹ I believe that even Paul’s solemn denunciation of the high priest was a faithful representation of God’s prophetic voice, for God did strike this “whitewashed wall.”

On top of unqualified praise, God further encourages him with the promise that, just as he solemnly testified about God in Jerusalem, so he “must” (*dei* = “a divine necessity”) testify in Rome. Though the path may remain difficult, Paul’s arrival and witness in Rome is guaranteed. As Stott affirms, “It would be hard to exaggerate the calm courage which this assurance must have brought Paul during his three further trials, his two years’ imprisonment and his hazardous voyage to Rome.”¹²

The rest of the story has all the drama and intrigue of a Hollywood action thriller, but in this case it is true.

III. Paul rescued from a Jewish Plot (23:12–35)

A. The plot is hatched (23:12–15)

When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, “We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near.” (23:12–15)

Having failed in their earlier attempt to kill Paul in the temple, more than forty fanatical Jews (most likely from Asia) swore to neither eat nor drink until they killed Paul. Their plan was to have the chief priest and elders request an additional hearing with Paul so that they could determine his case more exactly. As soon as Paul was brought out, they vowed to ambush and kill him. This should remove any doubts about Ananias’ character, as he now joins the conspiracy of assassins.

B. Paul’s nephew intervenes (23:16–22)

Now the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him.” So he took him and brought him

to the tribune and said, “Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you.” The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?” And he said, “The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent.” So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, “Tell no one that you have informed me of these things.” (23:16–22)

The same night Paul has a vision he will reach Rome, a boy shows up at the right place and time and overhears a plot to kill his uncle. We have no knowledge of Paul’s immediately family. But this young man’s singular courage is striking, especially given the open hostility to his uncle not only from Jewish leadership, but within his own family. In Philippians 3:8 Paul says he suffered the loss of all things for his allegiance to Jesus, suggesting he was disinherited and shunned by his family. But when his nephew hears the plot to kill his uncle, loyal-love drives him to save a life.

The tribune remains true to his character as an honest truth seeker and promoter of justice. His willingness to hear a youth and treat his testimony as credible is an attribute Jesus highly commended, for “whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (Matt 18:5). Even more surprising is the resolve and speed with which he acts.

C. The tribune intervenes (23:23–35)

Then he called two of the centurions and said, “Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor.” (23:23–24)

Not wanting to risk a Roman citizen’s assassination on his watch, the tribune secures Paul to safety in Caesarea, the provincial capital. N. T. Wright observes, “Two hundred soldiers, 70 horsemen, 200 spearmen; nobody ever accused the Romans of underplaying their hand when it came to military presence. They may not know exactly who Paul is or what the fuss is all about, but soldiering is about doing, not knowing, and doing is what the Romans do best.”¹³ Paul must have smiled as the guards who were ready flog him the previous day are now his royal escort along with half of the Roman garrison at the Fortress of Antonia. It’s a first-class ride by night to Herod’s coastal palace.

And he wrote a letter to this effect: “Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.” (23:25–30)

Before Paul leaves, the tribune must account for what he is doing, but it takes some creativity lest he implicate himself for almost

flogging a Roman prisoner. So, he switches the order of events to remove some of the inconvenient facts and explains that he rescued Paul “having learned that he was a Roman citizen.” But the most important part of the letter preserves the truth about Paul, that all accusations against him had to do only with questions about Jewish law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment.

So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him. When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, he said, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.” And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod’s praetorium. (23:31–35)

Upon arrival in Caesarea, Paul meets Governor Felix, who must decide whether to seek an outside arbitrator or hear Paul’s case himself. Upon learning Paul came from the Roman province of Cilicia, Felix determined he had the authority to hear Paul’s case. So, he kept Paul safely guarded in Herod the Great’s retreat while they waited for his accusers to arrive.

While Paul awaits trial, we may pause to consider what his ordeal teaches about the kingdom of God advances in the midst of the kingdoms of man. We do this through four character studies.

IV. How does the kingdom advance in the midst of imperfect power structures

A. Paul the accused

Paul does the right thing, living as an upright citizen, yet he is willing to confront evil in a respectful way. He is vindicated by the tribune and God, who privately praises him, then protects him, and fulfills his prophetic word regarding Ananias, who would eventually be killed during the war with Rome.

When the Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17–18) all of God’s people became not just priests, but also prophets to be salt and light to the world. When the church is silent, the world grows dark and evil reigns with impunity. Passiveness enables death and prevents the spread of Christ’s good news. Like Paul, we respectfully challenge all who are in authority to do justice because we believe that in the resurrection, God will set the world right, restoring all things in a new creation. Relatedly, our cries should not be for those rulers’ eternal condemnation, but for their conviction and salvation (1 Tim 2:1–4). Pastor Wang’s letter ends with a passionate plea for the Communist authorities to repent and follow Jesus.

But be **warned**. Having a prophetic role, does not give us license to spread our rancor through social media and the internet. The kingdom of God is all about relationships and the dignity of every human being, which means that the wicked must be addressed with grace in person as you have the opportunity.

B. Paul’s nephew

Paul’s nephew just happens to be in the right place at the right time. He courageously does the right thing without asking permission and obeys his uncle’s request to go to the proper authorities. He risks

ridicule by family and retaliation by Jewish authorities, but in the end, he is responsible for saving Paul’s life.

C. The Tribune

Luke honors the tribune by giving his name at the conclusion of the story when he composes his letter. He is open to truth and seeks the facts. He would not proceed without “knowing for certain” the facts about Paul. We see that a non-religious person who seeks justice is more effective for the kingdom than devoutly religious people with political agendas.

I suspect at the end of the day, the tribune wondered if any good would come from his inability to get political extremists on the right and on the left to come together and set forth the facts of the case. Yet, he was the instrument that kept Paul safe from Jewish violence and enabled him to further the kingdom by dispatching him to Caesarea.

D. God the real hero

This is an imperfect, fallen world, and there will always be corrupt leaders who do evil. But even when they appear to triumph, it does not mean God is passive and disinterested. He will always have the last word, the final judgment. The only kingdom that lasts forever is God’s kingdom.

**The wicked watches for the righteous
and seeks to put him to death.**

**The LORD will not abandon him to his power
or let him be condemned when he is brought to trial.**

Wait for the LORD and keep his way,

and he will exalt you to inherit the land;

you will look on when the wicked are cut off. (Ps 37:32–34)

1. Wang Yi, “My Declaration of Faithful Disobedience,” 2018. <https://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/cwn/2018/december/early-rain-church-releases-letter-written-by-pastor-arrested-by-chinese-authorities> Cited August 2019.
2. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3:3259, 3252.
3. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 449.
4. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebel and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), paragraph 52337.
5. Ezekiel 13:8-16.
6. Keener, *Acts*, 3:3279.
7. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 451.
8. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two, Chapters 13–28* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 167–68.
9. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 169.
10. Keener, *Acts*, 3:3281.
11. Keener, *Acts*, 3:3299.
12. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 353.
13. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 177.