

“Shrewd as Serpents, Harmless as Doves”
(Acts 22:22-23:10)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. Last week, we considered Paul’s defense of the Gospel.

a. Remember its uniqueness:

- (i) It wasn’t a message on the person, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – things we generally consider to be the Gospel.
- (ii) He didn’t give them an argument – or polemic – from the Scripture, to prove Jesus was the Christ.
- (iii) He didn’t perform a miracle.
- (iv) But he gave them his personal testimony.

b. Paul told them how Christ changed his life:

- (i) How he was zealous for the traditions – like they were – how he hated Christians, even hunted them for foreign cities.
- (ii) But how Christ appeared to him, humbled him by blinding him, ordered him to go to the city, revealed His will to him there, and gave him back his sight.
- (iii) He also told them about his life after that decisive moment, how his sins were washed away by calling on the name of Jesus, how he was baptized, and how he began to live for Christ.
- (iv) These were not the facts of the Gospel, but ways in which the Lord changed his life through the power of the Gospel.

2. From this, we saw two things:

a. That even something as subjective as a personal testimony can give powerful objective evidence to the truth of the Gospel:

- (i) When the power of the Gospel works itself out in our lives, it gives convincing evidence to its truth.
- (ii) That’s why sanctification is so important, and why it’s so important that we strive to become more like Jesus.
- (iii) This is, by the way, one of the reasons we’re spending so much time on this subject in the evening services: if we understand what sanctification is – that is, the marks of grace – then we know what to aim at in our lives.

b. Second, we saw the importance of relating to our audience.

- (i) Paul did everything he could to get the Jews to sympathize with him.
- (ii) He made several points of contact between them and himself.
- (iii) We need to learn to draw on our own experience to do the same – to relate to people, to show them how much we were like them before Christ changed us, to show that the same is possible for them.

B. Preview.

1. This morning, we return to an earlier theme: a reminder of the hatred the world has for Christ and Christians.
 - a. We'll look at two examples:
 - (i) That of the Jewish mob that wanted to kill Paul because he was a Christian.
 - (ii) That of the Jewish Council that desired the same thing for the same reason.
 - b. But we'll also see how Paul handles himself during the persecution:
 - (i) He doesn't become fearful, but draws upon God-given wisdom to steer a straight course to honor God and to preserve his life.
 - (ii) In doing this, we not only see the Lord protect Paul's life again, we see how He does so by helping Paul to be as shrewd as a serpent and harmless and innocent as a dove.
2. We'll look:
 - a. First, at Paul before the mob.
 - b. And second, at Paul before the Council.

II. Sermon.

- A. First, let's consider Paul before the mob.
 1. As Paul was finishing his testimony, he said something the Jews didn't like.
 - a. They had been quietly listening to this point; but when he told them Jesus was sending him to the Gentiles because the Jews wouldn't listen, they were outraged – Jesus said He would turn to the Gentiles to provoke the Jews to jealousy: we see something of that here.
 - b. The net result was that they wanted to kill him (v. 22).
 - (i) Unbelievers hate the truth because it exposes their sins.
 - (ii) But they also hate those who bring that truth – the message and messenger are closely connected.
 - c. They became so violent, that the Roman tribune ordered Paul to be brought back into the barracks (vv. 23-24) for two reasons:
 - (i) To protect Paul from the mob.
 - (ii) And to find out why they were so angry with him, since the commander either didn't understand Hebrew or the Jewish faith, particularly their view of Gentiles.
 2. It's here we see the fulfillment of one of Jesus' promises: that the Spirit would give us what we are to say in difficult times.
 - a. As they were preparing to scourge Paul – literally to torture the truth out of him – Paul calmly asked the centurion a question: “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned” (v. 25)?

- (i) The answer of course was, no. Cicero wrote, “It is a heinous sin to bind a Roman citizen, it is wickedness to beat him, it is next to parricide (killing a parent or close relative) to kill him, and what shall I say to crucify him?” (Gill).
 - (ii) Henry writes, “The Romans had a law (it was called *lex Sempronia*), that if any magistrate did chastise or condemn a freeman of Rome, *indicta causa--without hearing him speak for himself, and deliberating upon the whole of his case*, he should be liable to the sentence of the people, who were very jealous of their liberties. It is indeed the privilege of every man not to have wrong done him, except it be proved he has done wrong; as it is of every Englishman by *Magna Charta* not to be dis-seized of his life or freehold, but by a verdict of twelve men of his peers.”
 - (iii) The Lord had provided Paul with a providential advantage: he was a Roman citizen.
- b. This gave the centurion overseeing Paul’s torture good reason to pause:
- (i) He came and questioned the commander, and the commander came and questioned Paul (v. 26).
 - (a) “Are you a Roman?” Paul said, “Yes” (v. 27).
 - (b) “The commander answered, ‘I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.’ And Paul said, ‘But I was actually born a citizen’” (v. 28).
 - (c) Those born in Tarsus – a city given its freedom by Mark Antony – were born free citizens of Rome (Gill).
 - (d) Paul didn’t choose to be born there, but God chose that he would for this purpose, among other things.
 - (ii) Those about to scourge him immediately let him go, and both they and the commander were afraid because they had put a Roman citizen in chains without a trial (v. 29).
 - (a) It was a serious crime to bind a Roman citizen.
 - (b) These men might well lose their commissions for it.
 - (c) Sometimes the fear of man is more effective than the fear of God.
- c. Now did Paul have this all planned out?
- (i) It’s hard to know with certainty.
 - (ii) But we do know that Jesus gave him and us a promise: “When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:11-12).
 - (iii) This doesn’t necessarily mean He will give us a supernatural revelation. It can simply mean the Spirit will help us to draw on our experience and lead us in the right things to say: to be shrewd/wise as serpents.

B. Second, let's consider Paul before the Council.

1. The commander realized he wouldn't get the truth from the mob, so he brought Paul before the chief priests and Council to find it (v. 30).
 - a. Paul had once attended the Council when Stephen was on trial and cast his vote against him (Acts 7; 26:10). Now he must also stand before the Council to bear witness to the truth.
 - b. He begins again with his testimony: "Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, 'Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day'" (23:1).
 - (i) He didn't mean by this that he was perfect. He considered himself to be the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).
 - (ii) What he meant was that he has sought to live with a clear conscience – when he sinned, he would repent and renew his covenant with God.
 - (iii) The Council looked at him as a deserter, an apostate; but he considered himself a conscientious follower of Christ.
 - c. What he said offended Ananias, and so he commanded those standing next to him to strike him on the mouth (v. 2).
 - (i) Paul's reaction in this case was not that of a dove, but a lion. It was an imprecation.
 - (a) The man who ordered this must be a white-washed wall – a hypocrite – and God would repay him for his hypocrisy.
 - (b) It was presumptuous to sit in judgment against Paul according to the Law, and then to violate that Law himself by ordering him to be struck when he had not as yet been found guilty.
 - (c) Some believe the Lord actually did strike Ananias down shortly after this.
 - (iii) But notice when Paul was admonished by some bystanders, he repented (vv. 4-5).
 - (a) They said, "Do you revile God's high priest?"
 - (b) Paul said he didn't know this man was the high priest; he may not have been sitting where the high priest would sit or wearing his priestly robes.
 - (c) He had been away from Jerusalem long enough not to recognize the current high priest.
 - (d) Paul owed him the respect due to his office.
 - (e) And so again we see Paul seeking to be innocent as a dove: where he had done wrong, he was willing to confess it – in this case in the manner, not so much in the matter of what he said.
2. But here again we see Paul's shrewdness:
 - a. Instead of allowing this meeting to continue in the direction that it was already headed – against Paul and the Gospel, which was clear from the treatment they had already given him – Paul saw another possible strategy.

- b. Noticing that the Council was composed both of Pharisees and Sadducees, he decided to bring the Pharisees to his aid (vv. 6-8).
 - (i) It was very simple to do: he knew their weakness, their point of disagreement.
 - (ii) He knew very well what the Sadducees denied the existence of angels and spirits; he knew they denied the resurrection, since when a body died, they didn't believe there was a spirit to return to it; he knew they didn't believe in future rewards and punishments, but only in the present world.
 - (iii) The Pharisees affirmed all these things, and so did Paul, so why not rally them to his side?
 - (iv) And so he cried "out in the Council, 'Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!'" (v. 6).

- c. The result, of course, was division (v. 7).
 - (i) With their attention now on each other, it turned from Paul.
 - (ii) The Pharisees even began sympathizing with Paul – it's interesting how we can be at war with someone until we are faced with a common enemy, under these circumstances we can even begin to excuse one another and think the best of each other.
 - (iii) They began to think that though he was wrong about Jesus, that perhaps an angel had spoken to him (v. 9).

- d. The division apparently grew into a tug-of-war over Paul, so that the commander was afraid he would be torn to pieces (v. 10).
 - (i) Perhaps the Sadducees were trying to pull him away to do him in, while the Pharisees were trying to hold onto him to protect him.
 - (ii) Whatever the case, the commander took Paul back to the barracks, where he would again be safe (v. 10), especially since he knew this time that Paul was a Roman citizen.

- e. We see again how the Lord Providentially protected Paul by giving him the wisdom he needed to address this crowd.
 - (i) Jesus doesn't always protect us through supernatural means – by His angels or through miraculous intervention.
 - (ii) Sometimes He will give us the wisdom we need to say the right thing at the right time.
 - (iii) This, combined with an innocent and harmless life, will be our best protection from the enemy.
 - (iv) And so let's pray that God will give us the grace we need to grow in the gentle and humble likeness of Christ, and at the same time, to grow in holy wisdom and knowledge. Amen.