



NG Study Guide: Acts 23:1-10 :: “The Gospel on Trial” [5.28.23]

Love God + know the Bible better:

1. Read the passage cited above, and try to answer the questions below before your group meets.
2. Regularly review the notes at the bottom.

The Study

Thesis: When you share your faith in Jesus and His gospel, it might feel like the gospel is on trial. Nevertheless, we want to share the gospel so people can receive Jesus, experience His life and a hope that transcends circumstances.

Subject: Paul’s trial before the Jewish council

Object: Experience gospel hope

Context (22:30): *The next day* relates to the day after the Jewish mob had falsely accused Paul of bringing a Gentile into an area of the temple reserved for Jews, and for teaching Jews not to follow Moses’ commands. A Roman commander and his troops twice rescued Paul from the mob.

A. God’s righteousness (1-5)

³⁰ *The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them. Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, “Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.”* ² *And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.* ³ *Then Paul said to him, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?”* ⁴ *And those who stood by said, “Do you revile God’s high priest?”* ⁵ *Then Paul said, “I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’”*

1. Paul declared that he was right with God

The commander wanted to know what Paul was accused of. So, he summoned the Jewish chief priests and all their council to appear (30). The council is the Sanhedrin, a group of seventy elders that governed the religious and civic lives of the Jews. This would be like our executive, legislative, and judicial branches in one group. Paul was brought before them. *Paul looked earnestly at the council and began, Men and brethren* (1). Paul had previously been a member of this council (26:10), and that is why he refers to them as “brethren” rather than the customary “fathers.” Paul wanted desperately to see his fellow Jews come to faith in Christ as their Messiah (Acts 9:15-16), and now he would have a opportunity before the highest ranking Jewish leaders.

Paul declared, *I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day* (1), and the high priest Ananias commands those next to Paul to slap him on the mouth (2). Why was the high priest so upset about what Paul said? It wasn’t that Paul violated protocol by speaking before being permitted to. Nor was he claiming to be morally perfect. Similarly, he wasn’t entering a “not guilty” plea. Paul was in effect claiming that he was still a Jew and was in right standing with God

as a follower of Christ. Unfortunately, before Paul could elaborate on the gospel and God's righteousness available through faith in Christ, things went sideways in a hurry. After the slap on the mouth, Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?" A whitewashed wall was a reference to something defiled with decay and death inside. The council was to judge Paul according to the law, but they were violating the law because you could not strike an accused without a guilty verdict (Deuteronomy 25:1-2).

2. Paul was right with God because of Christ's righteousness (not self-righteousness)

The members of the council were taken aback that Paul would speak in an abusive and insulting manner to the high priest (4). Paul replies that he did not know Ananias was the high priest. Paul had just returned to Jerusalem after being away for years, perhaps the high priest was not wearing the high priest's garments, and perhaps it was the issue of Paul's poor eyesight. Paul quoted Exodus 22:28, *You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people* (5). Paul admits he was wrong. Paul was not guilty of the false charge of bringing a Gentile into an area outside the temple restricted to Jews, but he also recognized his wrongs before God and man. Paul was not right with God because of his righteousness, but Jesus righteousness given to him through faith in Christ (Romans 5:1-18). On the other hand, Ananias the high priest doesn't admit his fault, he is self-righteous. Ironically, per the Jewish historian Josephus, Ananias was corrupt. He stole from the tithes and was a pro-Roman puppet, and was arguably the most corrupt high priest ever and was killed by the Jews in a rebellion against Rome in 66 A.D.

The self-righteous refuse God's righteousness through Christ, and the humble are made right with God through Christ. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up (James 4:10).

B. God's resurrection (6-9)

But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"⁷ And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided.⁸ For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both.⁹ Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.

1. The resurrection is the foundation of the gospel

Paul realized that the council was pretty evenly divided between Sadducees and Pharisees.

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, angels, or the spiritual realm generally (8). They only believed in the first five books of Moses (Torah) as being authoritative. Jesus said of the Sadducees that they did not know God's work or power. He reminded them that His Father declared, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3). Thus, He is the God of the living not the dead (Matthew 22:29-32) (Cf. I am v. I was). They tended to be wealthy, elitists, materialistic, and in most respects were living for this world. They might be described today as religious liberals.

The Pharisees began around 160 B.C., and their name means "separated ones." They sought to separate from the influence of impurity (sin) and Greek or worldly culture. Jesus frequently confronted them regarding self-righteousness; and the tendency to focus on a particular action while neglecting important attitudes. For example, tithing from the spice garden, but neglecting mercy, justice, and faith. Jesus also corrected them regarding their oral traditions that added burdens beyond God's commands (legalism). For example, in trying to codify what is work in order to observe the Sabbath prohibition of work they wrote volumes of rules that in many ways misrepresented God's purpose and heart for Sabbath. Nevertheless they were orthodox in their theology regarding the spiritual realm, angels, and the resurrection (8). Paul was a Pharisee as was his father (7).

Paul was falsely accused of teaching Jews not to follow the law of Moses, and for bringing a Gentile in an area of the temple compound reserved for Jews. Rather than simply deny the charges, Paul asserts the crux of his trial is the resurrection (6). The resurrection is the foundation of the gospel (1Corinthians 15). If there is no resurrection of Jesus then there is no forgiveness of sin available; but since Jesus is risen his followers will be forgiven, restored to God and resurrected too (and if Christ is risen then He has truly ushered in the New Covenant. Thus eliminating distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, and the notion that religious performance is the means to be right with God).

2. The resurrection provides hope

Paul understood the important connection between hope and the resurrection. Similarly, Peter observes that we are born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1Pet. 1:3). Hope is not wishful thinking, but an eager, confident expectation. This hope is an anchor for the soul. In Romans 15 we learn that the Scriptures are to give us hope (4), the Father is the God of hope, the Holy Spirit empowers hope (13), and Jesus gives hope to those separated from God (12). Hope, along with faith and love are enduring virtues of the Christian life (1Corinthians 13:13); and love flows from hope (Colossians 1:4-5).

C. God's rescue (10)

Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.

There was dissension between the Pharisees supporting the resurrection and suggesting that Paul's teaching may be from God (7,9), and the Sadducees who disagreed (8). The hostility became so great that the Roman commander ordered his soldiers to take Paul from the mob and bring him into the fortress barracks (10). This is the third time the Romans have rescued Paul from this angry mob. Yet, it is God who is protecting, preserving and rescuing Paul. Within hours, the Lord will encourage Paul with these words, "Be of good cheer Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome" (11). God has rescued Paul and will continue to protect Him until God's time is fulfilled.

1. The gospel is God's rescue plan

The gospel is the Good News because through the gospel we clearly discover that we can be made right with God through faith in Jesus (yielding to God and choosing to follow Jesus). It is the only way for people to be saved: forgiven of sin, restored to God, receive spiritual life, and experience eternal life (Ephesians 2:8-9, Acts 4:12, John 14:6).

2. When the gospel is on trial those who respond are on trial

The hope and truth of the gospel are supported by evidence beyond a reasonable doubt in proof of Jesus' resurrection. Thus, when the gospel is proclaimed the listeners who adjudicate the claims of the gospel, are in fact unknowingly the ones on trial. God is offering the Good News that you can receive spiritual life, restoration with God and experience hope that transcends circumstances. The choice is yours. Trust God, have hope, and you won't regret.

Study Guide Qs:

Q1. The gospel assures Jesus' followers that they are right with God through faith in Jesus rather than their moral perfection (performance). How does that truth make you feel?

Q2. The gospel offers hope because of Jesus' resurrection. How does this hope impact how Jesus' followers should navigate difficult circumstances?

Q3. Describe some difficult circumstances that you had to navigate during the last year. How did God's hope help?

Q4. God doesn't always rescue from trials (difficulties) in the way that you hoped. How is the gospel the ultimate rescue during difficult circumstances?

"Disciples Who Dig Deeper" (optional or alternative study)

1. Here are some good insights about the Christian's hope: <https://www.gotquestions.org/living-hope.html>.

2. What is the Christian's hope: <https://www.gotquestions.org/hope-Bible.html>.

Love your neighbors (inside + outside the group) better:

1. Who would like to share how they sought to befriend or build relationship with their neighbors inside or outside the group?

2. Are there some needs that can provide us an opportunity to love our neighbors inside or outside the group?

Disciples who make disciples:

1. Who would like to share how they recently sought to make disciples?

2. Here is a disciple making idea to consider for the weeks ahead:

Share with a neighbor where you live, work, study, play or worship, how God's hope has comforted you in difficult times.

Prayer [Loving God and Neighbors better]:

Close the NG meeting with a time of group prayer. Encourage each participant to pray, but don't force anyone to pray. Encourage the group to keep their prayers brief so that each person can pray.

Notes:

1. Preparation and participation: Group participants should read the teacher's notes contained in this study guide prior to your meeting and be prepared to discuss the content. Remember the purpose of preparation and participation is to accelerate growth as disciples who loves God supremely, loves neighbors like self, and make other disciples who do likewise. **Seek to involve as many group participants as possible.** A good group discussion time allows people to get to know the passage and one another better.

2. Consider what about the passage is particularly exciting, challenging, or confusing?

If a leader is uncertain about a question of doctrine or theology don't hesitate to follow-up with your coach during the week. Then revisit the issue(s) when the group gathers next time.

3. The "Disciples Who Dig Deeper" section provides some optional or alternative study and discussion activities. As a group leader, you can choose to focus on the "Disciples Who Dig Deeper" section, include part of that section in your group meeting, or not use it at all. Try to give the group sufficient notice so they can be prepared for the meeting.

4. The "Love your neighbors" section encourages participants to love neighbors inside and outside the group better. As a leader, discuss this section frequently.

5. The "Disciples who make disciples" section provides a helpful idea, and encourages participants to be disciples who make disciples. Leaders should regularly encourage the group to review and discuss this section.