



On Trial for the Resurrection

Acts 23:1-10

1. A Spat with the Judge (verses 1-5)

2. A Split in the Jury (verses 6-10)

From December 6 to December 9, 1955, the murder trial of Harry Leonard Washburn made history. It was the first live televised murder trial in the United States. One account in the local newspaper read, "From Dec. 6-9, 1955, one could have 'shot a cannon down Austin Avenue and not hurt a soul' because the normally frenzied Christmas shoppers were all inside stores watching the trial on TV." One observer said, "The camera went on when the judge called court to order every morning and stayed on all day until we recessed."^[1] Of course, that became the first of many televised courtroom proceedings.

Perhaps the most famous televised trial of all was that of O. J. Simpson, the football star who was accused of murdering his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goldman. The trial took eight months, from January until October, 1995, cameras were in the courtroom. The trial became a national obsession.

When the verdict came down on October 3, 1995, I was working at Kishwaukee Community Hospital in DeKalb, Illinois. There was a crowd of employees surrounding a television set watching the verdict. And when Simpson was declared not-guilty, the main cook at the hospital declared that there would be free orange juice for the rest of the week. (Free OJ).

Since then, there have been many trials broadcast across our nation and around the world. And with the advent of streaming, many have found their way to YouTube. You can go right now and binge watch the trials of many: Kyle Rittenhouse, Derek Chauvin, Amber Heard and Johnny Depp. Hours of footage of trials are available to you today to watch.

Well, this morning, we aren't going to watch a trial on the screen, but we are going to read about a trial taking place. We read about it in the book of Acts. We read about it in Acts 23:10. Now, before we read our text this morning, entering into this courtroom scene, I want to catch you up to speed.

For the past two years, we have been working our way through the book of Acts. The book tells the inspired history of the expanse of the gospel, from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). It begins in chapter 1 with about a hundred followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. It ends in chapter 28 with untold thousands of believers all across the known world at the time. The one mostly responsible for the expansion of the gospel is the apostle Paul. He went on three missionary journeys, bringing the gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Acts 21 records for us when Paul returned from his third missionary journey. He arrived back in Jerusalem during Pentecost. He tried to make peace with the believing Jews, by paying for, and by offering a Nazirite sacrifice in the temple. But when Paul was in the temple, the unbelieving Jews saw their chance. They falsely accused him of bringing a Gentile into the temple (Acts 21:28). which caused an uproar among the Jews! (Acts 21:30) They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple and began to beat him (Acts 21:32). It was only because the Roman soldiers were watching over the temple grounds in their guard towers, and noticed the commotion, and came to rescue Paul, that Paul wasn't killed by the mob (Acts 21:31).

As Paul was taken away by the tribune, he convinced the tribune to be able to speak to the crowd. and speak he did. Paul basically gave his testimony to the crowds, who were listening to him until he said that Jesus had commanded him to go to the Gentiles with the gospel. At this, there was another uproar! The Jews hated the Gentiles. and couldn't imagine anyone reaching out to them with religious teaching of any kind! For the second time, Paul was rescued by the Romans from the crowds, as he was taken into Roman custody.

This tribune was confused as to why Paul was causing such a ruckus. So, he ordered him to be "examined by flogging" (Acts 22:24). In other words, he ordered him to be tortured to figure out what was going on. Just as the centurion was about to strike the first blow upon Paul's back, Paul said, (Acts 22:25) "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" Of course, it wasn't. The tribune had to change plans. He kept Paul in custody for the night.

We pick it up in chapter 22, verse 30.

Acts 22:30

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.

Picture the scene. This Roman tribune, is trying to figure out what's up with Paul, and why the Jews are so angry with him. Why did he have to rescue Paul twice from the Jewish mob? So, he called the Jewish religious leaders to come and meet with him. The priest came, and all the religious counsel. From best guess that we have, it was the high priest, and seventy other men, Pharisees and Sadducees. Certainly, there were some on security detail that were present as well. Not unlike today, when we have police officers in our courtrooms to maintain decorum. So, perhaps there were 80 people were at this trial? Maybe 100?

Anyway, the tribune placed Paul in the midst of them, and the trial began. all the while, this Roman tribune was watching to learn exactly what is was about this man that stirred up such anger with the Jews! With that, we read our text:

Acts 23:1-10

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. Then 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.'" 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. 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.

Now, I trust that you can see that this is not a normal trial. There were no formal proceedings. There were no formal charges. There were no prosecuting attorneys. Paul was not offered a lawyer to help in his defense. Yet, make no mistake. This was a trial. Judge and jury were assembled together. They were assembled together to bring forth the truth about the apostle Paul.

As the trial unfolds, Paul clarifies why they were all there at that moment. He said (Acts 23:6), "It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial." From this phrase, I get the title of my message this morning: "On Trial for the Resurrection."

Now, our text breaks nicely in half. In the first five verses, we see Paul interacting with the judge, that is the high priest. In the last five verses, we see Paul interacting with the jury, that is the Pharisees and Sadducees. Here's what I'm calling the first half:

1. A Spat with the Judge (verses 1-5)

In these verses, we see Paul going back and forth with the high priest, Ananias is his name. From the get go, it goes badly.

Acts 23:1

And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day."

Paul here stands boldly before judge and jury. He is not like the cowardly lion, who trembled before Oz, and ran away scared out of his mind. No. Paul stood boldly before this council. Gazing in their eyes. That's what it means that he "looking intently at the council." No looking down. Not ashamed or intimidated in any way. Indeed, Proverbs 28:1 is illustrated in the apostle Paul, "The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion." Indeed, Paul was a righteous man. He was as bold as a lion, declaring his righteousness. Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day" (verse 1).

Now, Paul didn't mean by this that he never sinned. Indeed, we saw a few weeks ago, how Paul fully admitted how wrong he was, in persecuting Christians "to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women" (Acts 22:4). Paul wasn't saying that he was blameless. Rather, Paul said that he has always lived his life in good conscience before God. That is, pursuing the Lord with all of his heart, following after what he believes is right.

I'm reminded of the scene at the Diet of Worms with Martin Luther, when he stood before the pope and the counsel of cardinals. He was asked to recant his writings. And he stood boldly before them, saying, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, ... my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience would be neither right nor safe. God help me. [Here I stand, I can do no other.] Amen."^[2]

This is what Paul was saying. He has always lived his life, bound by conscience. He can do no other. Paul was compelled in all of his missionary activity, bringing the gospel to the Gentiles in the far reaches of the earth. We see the trial take a turn for the worse in verse 2.

Acts 23:2

And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

So much for being innocent until proven guilty. In fact, if anything, it was the high priest who was guilty at that moment. For according to Jewish oral tradition, it was said, "He who strikes the cheek of an Israelite, strikes, as it were, the glory of God."^[3]

Don't think of this as a mere "slap" on the cheek. This is the same word used in (Acts 21:32) which describes the Jewish crowd beating Paul with the intent to kill him. Paul may well have been hit with a stick or a rod in the mouth with a direct blow to the face.

Such violence was normative for Ananias. We know a lot about him from extra-Biblical sources. He reigned as high priest from 47-59 A.D, (which helps to date the book of Acts). Ananias was an evil king. He was a wicked man. In fact, he was known for "being vicious and violent."^[4] One commentator says, "he was known for greed, a quick temper, violence, and pro-Roman sentiments" (Merida, p. 350).^[5] Eventually, Josephus tells us, he was assassinated by the Jews, who were tired of his tyranny.^[6]

It only makes sense the Ananias would lash out at Paul like this. He had no regard for the law. Indeed, the law said, "You shall do no injustice

in court" (Leviticus 19:15). But this was unjust! It was unjust to slap a man for simply professing his innocence! And Paul was quick to point out the wrong done to him:

Acts 23:3

Then 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?"

Such was the boldness and quick wit of Paul. He recognized immediately the injustice of what happened to him. Further, he had the boldness to point it out.

Here was the high priest, under the law, acting as judge. Yet, violating that same law that he seeks to uphold (Leviticus 19:15). He was unjust in ordering Paul to be struck in the mouth. Paul pointed out the obvious. Ananias was a hypocrite. He calls him here a "whitewashed wall."

You may be familiar with the imagery here from the words of Jesus. When confronting the Pharisees, Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:27-28). The picture Jesus gives is one of appearance. On the outside, all looks squeaky clean. But the inner reality is something altogether different! Such a picture is true with Ananias.

Paul may have had a slightly different picture in mind, calling him a "whitewashed wall" not a "whitewashed tomb." Paul may have been thinking of Ezekiel's imagery, not the imagery of Jesus. In Ezekiel 13, we read of God's promise to bring down the false prophets of Ezekiel's day.

Ezekiel 13:10-14

Thus says the Lord GOD: ... When the people build a wall, these prophets smear it with whitewash, say to those who smear it with whitewash that it shall fall! There will be a deluge of rain, and you, O great hailstones, will fall, and a stormy wind break out. And when the wall falls, will it not be said to you, 'Where is the coating with which you smeared it?' Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: I will make a stormy wind break out in my wrath, and there shall be a deluge of rain in my anger, and great hailstones in wrath to make a full end. And I will break down the wall that you have smeared with whitewash, and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you shall perish in the midst of it, and you shall know that I am the Lord GOD.

Ezekiel promises that all you may do to try to cover everything, masking your true self, will not succeed. God will bring it down to the ground.

Hypocrisy is devastating. It's not only devastating for the hypocrite, when all is open and laid bare before the Lord. But it's also devastating for the many doubters, who look on and see us proclaim with our mouths, what our actions deny. How many people have been turned away from religion because of hypocrisy. Oh, may the Lord expose our hypocrisy.

May we be rich in the gospel! We don't want to point to ourselves because we are righteous in and of ourselves. But our hope is in Christ, where our righteousness is! We aren't righteous people. We seek it, but we fail. We aren't good before the Lord. But we have a humble dependence upon Jesus Christ, who alone can make us righteous. Our message is this: put your trust in him.

Paul's message to Ananias is this:

Acts 23:3

"God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!"

Indeed, Paul was prophetic, as God struck down this man when he was assassinated by his own people (as I mentioned earlier). Now, Paul was confronted by the security detail that was standing near him.

Acts 23:4-5

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.'"

At this point, there is great room for speculation, because we don't have Paul's tone at this moment. We don't know if Paul was apologetic, "I'm sorry, I did not know that he was the high priest. I would never have rebuked him if I had known that he was the high priest. Because, the law says, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of our people' (in Exodus 22:28). I am sorry for doing so." This may have been Paul's tone.

But Paul may also have been sarcastic, "He's a high priest? Really? I see nothing priestly about this man, who has acted contrary to the law. Had he been a real high priest, I would never have cursed him as I did. Because, the law says, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of our people' (in Exodus 22:28)." We really don't know the answer. It really doesn't matter much, as the scene quickly changes from focusing upon the judge to the jury.

2. A Split in the Jury (verses 6-10)

Acts 23:6

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."

Here, we see the wisdom of Paul. He looked out upon this counsel, often called the Sanhedrin. He perceived that it was divided. Some were Sadducees and some were Pharisees. This is very equivalent to standing before our Senate, some of whom are Democrats, and some of

whom are Republicans. The Sadducees and Pharisees were as far apart as are the Democrats and Republicans of our day.

The Sadducees were the liberal ones. They believed only in Moses. Their Scripture consisted of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). They didn't believe in the oral tradition. They did not believe in the supernatural. They didn't believe in angels. They didn't believe in life after death. They believed that the soul perished with the body. They were loose with the sovereignty of God. They were loose with their living.

All of these things set them at odds with the Pharisees, who were legalists. They believed all of the Old Testament, including the oral law, which, they believed, was a hedge around the law to help them keep the law. The Pharisees were very strict about their conduct, trying their hardest to keep every detail of the law. Jesus spoke about how they even divide up their spices to make sure that they gave a tithe of everything they owned (Matthew 23:23). The Pharisees were the fundamentalists of the day, who lived very legalistic lives.

So, you had this council, filled up with the liberal Sadducees on the one hand, and the legalists Pharisees on the other. Paul identifies himself with the Pharisees, and puts forth his belief in the resurrection. In fact, Paul points out that this whole trial was a trial about the resurrection. something that the Pharisees would have embraced, and something that the Sadducees would have denied.

Acts 23:6

"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."

This caused, a "Split in the Jury." We read about the split in verse 7 and 8.

Acts 23:7-8

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.

Now, I do not believe that Paul only realized at that moment that this jury was comprised of two groups of people. He knew this fully well. He had seen this counsel in action.

Do you remember the story of Stephen? He was one of the seven who were commissioned to oversee the serving of the widows (as told in Acts, chapter 6). He was preaching about Jesus. Some rose up to dispute with him, but Stephen's wisdom and the Spirit of God was too much for them (Acts 6:9-10). So they brought Stephen before this very same council to stand as judge and jury over him.

It's not that the council was filled with the same people. (Remember, Stephen's execution was twenty years prior to what took place in our text). But it was the same institution. A high priest as judge, and 70 men as jury, filled with Sadducees and Pharisees.

When you read the account of Stephen, you realize that Paul was right there watching all of the proceedings (Acts 8:1). Watching Stephen proclaim the truth with boldness. Watching Stephen being condemned and stoned to death. Perhaps Paul knew that this was a potential outcome for him as well. So, he was strategic with his words, knowing that these words were true, and would cause a division.

Perhaps it was the Holy Spirit who gave him the words to speak. Do you remember the words of the Lord Jesus? "When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (Luke 12:11-12).

However the words came to mind, Paul cried out, "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" (Acts 23:6). This led to "a great clamor" (Acts 23:9). The New American Standard says, "A great uproar" The New King James says, "A loud outcry." We read in the ESV,

Acts 23:9

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?"

This is humorous! The Pharisees, while once opposed to Paul, was now on his side, simply because he mentioned the resurrection!

Acts 23:10

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.

This is now the third time that the tribune had to rescue Paul from the clutches of the Jews. The first time was when Paul was falsely accused of bringing a Greek into the temple area. The second time was after Paul said that Jesus told him to go to the Gentiles. This third time was when the council was divided. Apart from the sovereign intervention of the Lord, indeed, Paul would be "torn to pieces." We will see this next week with the great promise to Paul (Acts 23:11).

Here in his trial, Paul put his foot in the ground. He was on trial for the resurrection. He was going to stand firm.

Now, you might say, "I thought he was on trial for taking the gospel to the Gentiles." You might argue from Acts 22:21 that Jesus had told Paul "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles." To this I would agree. Yet, more foundationally, it was the risen Christ who told him to go to the Gentiles. Paul made his main point to be Jesus dead, buried and raised again. This was his "first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). This is the heart of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1).

Paul would bring up the resurrection and make it his main point before Felix. Listen to what he said to him:

Acts 24:14-21

But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia—they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: 'It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.'

Paul brings it back to the resurrection. He says, "This is the main issue of my case! I believe that Jesus rose from the dead. He is alive and sent me to go and preach this good news to those far and wide. Those opposed to me in the trial are denying that Jesus rose from the dead."

Later, when talking with Agrippa, Paul will make the resurrection the issue again.

Acts 26:6-8

And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

Paul says, "I am being accused for the hope of the resurrection of the dead, which brings life everlasting in his presence forever to those who believe in Jesus!"

Then, Paul asks the penetrating question, "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" After all, if we serve a sovereign God, why is it incredible that God raises the dead. It ought not to be an incredible, amazing thing that is not believed.

This has always been Paul's main thing. The "first-importance" issue is that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). To those in Corinth, Paul said, "This is the one thing that I made central to you: that Jesus was dead, but has risen from the dead!" Church family, we worship a risen savior.

A few years ago, I preached a sermon on Easter morning entitled, "The Apostolic Preaching of the Resurrection."^[7] In that sermon, I traced through Acts looking at the preaching of Peter and the preaching of Paul. Peter's preaching was all about the resurrection of Jesus. Paul's preaching was all about the resurrection of Jesus.

Peter preached the resurrection on the day of Pentecost. Peter preached the resurrection to Cornelius in his home. Paul preached the resurrection in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13). Paul preached the resurrection to the philosophers at the Areopagus (Acts 17).

Have you talked to people about the resurrection from the dead? I know that the resurrection isn't on the top of my mind as topics I need to talk about with the unbelievers in my life. When I think about the main thing I want to get across to Jesus, it's not the resurrection. In fact, I would say that I rarely put the resurrection out there as front and center of my beliefs. My preaching this morning has come as a rebuke to my own evangelism.

When people think about you, what do they think is your main thing? When people think about you, do they think about a religious fuddy-duddy who goes to church, doesn't swear, and is happy. Perhaps they think of you as a stickler about rules. There are some things that you do or don't do because of your involvement in the church. Or, when people think about you and your beliefs, do they think you believe in something crazy? A dead man rising from the dead, who is now seated in heaven and will come as the judge of us all. Do others think that you believe such a foolish thing?

Paul put it in perspective when writing to those in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

This is how the world ought to look at us, if indeed, they don't believe in Christ. They ought to say, "Those people at Rock Valley Bible Church are out of their minds! They are so deluded! How can they believe such things?" Indeed, if Christ Jesus didn't raise from the dead, then we are most to be pitied. But Paul says,

1 Corinthians 15:20

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

So, I encourage you this morning (as I challenge my own heart), as you seek to be a witness for Jesus, bring forth the resurrection. Tell others, "I'm a witness that Jesus Christ was dead, but not he lives again! Yes, he died. He died on the cross for my sins. But now he is risen from the dead. And he will bring me in victory to be with him, whether he comes during my lifetime or after I die. I will be with him forever. That is my hope. I hope in a living Messiah."

We too should be on trial for the resurrection from the dead, just like Paul was.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on November 20, 2022 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] <https://www.kwtx.com/content/news/-In-December-1955-local-murder-trial-kept-viewers-glued-to-TVs-565908081.html>

[2] Roland Bainton, *A Life of Martin Luther: Here I Stand* (New York: New American Library, 1950), 144. You can read the book electronically here: <https://archive.org/details/hereistand0000rola/page/n5/mode/2up>. Bainton didn't include the words, "Here I stand" in his quotation in his book. Some have questioned the veracity of these words. Here is a good article that puts it well: <https://blog.cph.org/read/everyday-faith/lutheranism/did-luther-really-say-here-i-stand>. The article states, "Well that certainly sounds like something Luther could have said."

[3] William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 164).

[4] Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), 809.

[5] Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Acts* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 350.

[6] Josephus, *War of the Jews* 2.17.6 and *War of the Jews* 2.17.9.

[7] See <https://sermons.rvbc.cc/sermons/2016-013>.