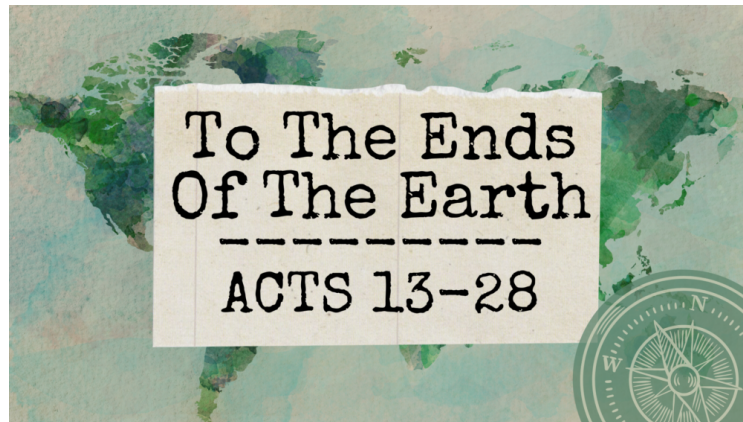


Bound, But Free!



Acts 22:25–23:35

Bro Ricky Cunningham

As we continue the book of Acts, it will be a little different than what we normally do. Part of it is because of what happened yesterday afternoon when Celisa and I went to Bowling Green to watch our grandson play a basketball game for his school. We decided we would hang out in Bowling Green afterward and eat some place that we don't have in Murray. After the game was over we went to Outback Steakhouse, but it was going to be an hour and a half before we could get in and we decided not to eat there. So we went down the road to Longhorn Steakhouse and found there wasn't even a place in the parking lot to park the truck. As we pulled back out on the road, Celisa said, "How about we go to that place we went to before?" Well, neither of us remembered the name of the restaurant but we remembered eating there before, so I started driving down the road. She reminded me it is on the right hand side of the road and it was built like an old barn. I saw it and we pulled into the parking lot. It is a place called Smokey Bones. Celisa ordered a smoked pork chop, fried apples, a baked potato with butter and sour cream, and a side salad. She just really made a meal out of that pork chop. I, on the other hand, just ordered a

brisket grilled cheese with two kinds of cheese and a side salad. After a while, we got our food and began to eat. While we were enjoying our food, we began to look around, and we saw this family beside us that had a personal grill that has been brought to their table! We could see on the grill rack sat every meat they serve in that restaurant—it was an all meat order! Now, me being a meat lover, I am no longer satisfied with my brisket grilled cheese, two kinds of cheese. I wanted to ask them if it would be rude if I borrowed one of those samplings they had. I literally watched them eat their meal, trying not to be rude! How did I miss that? Being a meat lover, how did I not know that I could have ordered what they ordered?

I have struggled this week of how to take Acts chapter 23 and do what we pastors are supposed to do. I mean, we start with the meat of God's Word, but then we are supposed to have an appetizer, an introduction to draw you in. We are supposed to have a few illustrations to make the point stick in your mind. Then, we are supposed to serve you some dessert in a way that when the meal has been eaten we know how to go home and apply it to our lives. But today's historical narrative is just tough for me. So when I was watching what that family beside me ate last night—no potato, no beans, no appetizer, no dessert, just meat—I decided I would try that this morning. Let's just walk through this passage—no potatoes, no beans, no fried apples—just the meat of God's Word. I promise you there are some ribs here, and we are going to get messy digging into them. Before this week is over, we are going to try to make sure we have gnawed on those bones and picked them clean, because Luke has a purpose for just slowing down here and telling us some things about Paul and what is going on, that to be honest with you, we are not that excited about.

Scripture

"But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him [the tribune] and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them."

We are going to back up to verse 25 and get all the way to verse 35 of chapter 23. When I think about this platter of meat that Luke serves us, I want to title it this way: Bound, But Free! For the rest of the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul is going to be, in a certain sense, bound. He can't physically do what he wants to do because of a consequence of a decision that he made.

Review

Now, I know some of us struggled when I introduced the thought that, possibly, the Apostle Paul shouldn't have been where he was. I know we all have him up on a pedestal, spiritually, and we think he cannot sin. But in writing this narrative as a theological historian, it seems to me that Luke is making it pretty clear that the Apostle Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem so he could be at the feast of Passover to testify the gospel to the Jews and then go on to Rome. But it was clear that the Holy Spirit had spoken to the church at Caesarea and told him not to go and what would happen to him if he did. A prophet even showed up, signifying to Paul that if he did this he would be bringing what would happen if he disobeyed God on himself. Paul goes anyway. There is a sense in which he is bearing a consequence to decisions he made. Yet in the midst of his circumstances, he is still free to do what God called him to do, and that is to be a witness about Jesus. So Paul was bound, but free. As we feast on this meat, I want you to keep this thought in mind—you may be that person who still feels bound. You are just not free. It isn't somebody else's fault you are bound; you are bound because you disobeyed God. You made a decision in your flesh that you thought was best and you now realize there are consequences. You are forgiven by God, forgiven by those you hurt, but you are still bound. Even for Christians who have been forgiven and totally repent, there are consequences to wrong decisions. There are consequences to evil choices. I want you to understand that in spite of the circumstances you find yourself in, if you are a child of God, His purpose for you is to witness about Him and you are still free to witness in the midst of your circumstances. We are going to see that in Paul's life.

You remember the story. Paul is about to be killed by a Jewish crowd. Today, most people would call them a mob, a religious group of people

who was totally out of control, taking the law into their own hands, and was going to kill a man if they could. When a Roman tribune got word, he unleashed a group of soldiers and they rescued him. While they are bringing him back to the fortress of Antonia, he wants to speak to the crowd and the Roman tribune lets him speak. Luke tells us he spoke in the Hebrew language of that day, Aramaic, and Paul tells his story—what his life was like before he met Christ, how he met Christ, and his life after Christ. He told the crowd that God told him not to come to Jerusalem because no one would listen to him. He argued with God, and God said He was going to send him far away to the Gentiles. The crowd got mad again and tried to kill him. The tribune had to send soldiers to rescue him from the crowd on the steps of the fortress of Antonia where a thousand Roman soldiers were garrisoned.

Paul Claims Citizenship

Now, verse 24 tells us that the Roman tribune wanted to get to the real story of why this religious crowd of people was mad at this one man. He decides that to get to the truth they were going to flog him. This wasn't going to be a Jewish flogging; it was going to be a Roman flogging. Up to this point, the Apostle Paul told the church in Caesarea to stop telling him not to go. He said he was going and he was willing to be imprisoned and even to die for Christ. Well, he has his opportunity right here because they are going to flog him.

Do you remember when he wrote to the church at Corinth that he had beat to within an inch of his life five different times by the Jewish people? The Bible says forty lashes, save one. In Greek culture, to suffer forty lashes, save one, was to be beaten to within an inch of your life. The Jews couldn't beat you this way, but the Roman government could, and Paul said the Jewish people beat him five times—three times, they beat him with rods, and once they stoned him. Now in Acts, to get to the real story, to make Paul tell the truth, the Roman tribune is going to torture him by flogging. They are going to strip him and tie him to a post. A Roman soldier will pick up a piece of wood handle that has three strips of leather embedded with rock, stone, and metal, and thirty-nine times, he will lacerate the body of Paul if he doesn't tell the truth, tell his story, satisfactorily. Josephus

(Jewish historian) and Tacitus (Roman historian) of the first century tell that the majority of the time the prisoner being flogged died from the wounds. Those who did not die were maimed or left paralyzed.

Now, they are going to flog Paul. Luke says they bound him to a post and the Roman soldier gets ready to whip him, and Paul asks this question, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" The Roman soldier drops the whip, backs up, and says... *What?* The soldier goes and gets the tribune and the tribune asks Paul if he is a Roman citizen and Paul said yes. The tribune says... *I bought my citizenship by a large sum of money, meaning he bribed to become a Roman citizen.* Paul says... *I didn't bribe anybody; I was born a citizen.* Do you see what Paul is doing here? He is playing his citizenship card. He is declaring his right as a Roman citizen. Why did he do that? Do you remember earlier in Acts when he was a Philippi? They beat him, threw him in prison, an earthquake shook the prison, the gates opened and freed Paul. The Philippian jailer gets ready to take his own life and Paul tells him to stop because they were all still there. Paul leads him and his whole family to Christ and baptizes them, and then he goes and gets back in the prison! The next morning when the authorities come, they go to get Paul, and Paul said... *I'm staying here. Tell them to come to me because I'm a Roman citizen.* He waited until after all the terrible stuff happened to him to say he was a citizen. This time, Paul tells them right up front. This man who is willing to die for the Lord didn't want to die that day. He doesn't want to die of whipping at the hand of a Roman soldier, so he announces who he is and the tribune takes Paul safely into the barracks. But Luke tells us the tribune still doesn't know why the Jewish crowd on this religious feast day would want to kill a man, so he is going to try to get to the truth.

Paul Addresses the Sanhedrin

I hope you see what Luke is doing here. Luke is painting a pagan government in a better light than Israel's religious government. Without a trial, people who claimed to be God's covenant people are willing to kill a man, but a pagan government said no, innocent until proven guilty. Wow! Now, we are going to see Luke's characterization of Rome and how they believed in justice, and how God's people said they believed in justice but

did things unjustly—and Paul is weaving this narrative. The Roman tribune decided that since he can't beat him to within an inch of his life to get to the truth, he will get the Sanhedrin leaders together, set Paul before them, and let both tell their stories, so he unbinds Paul. I want to make sure you understand this. In the eye of the Roman government, even though Paul is in jail, he hasn't done anything yet that is worthy of being in jail. He has been shackled all night and it is not until the next morning that he is unshackled and brought to stand before the Jewish Sanhedrin. Luke tells us that Paul looked intently at the council. The tense here means he 'continued' to look intently. It is the same word Luke uses in Acts 1 when Jesus ascended and the disciples stood gazing. Paul is gazing. Why does he do that? In my opinion, it is because it's been a while since he has been in a council meeting. Before he met Christ, he was a religious leader, and many of those guys in that crowd used to be his friends. They knew he was in line to be one of the main teachers of Israel. Then Paul's gaze fell on the faces of those who believed differently than he believed. See, Paul knew that the Sanhedrin council was made up of conservatives and liberals, politically and religiously.

Now, Paul addresses the council and he calls them "brothers." I want to tell you what I think Paul is doing. When Paul addressed the crowd as brothers and fathers, he was announcing his identity with them as a family member, a fellow brother—he recognized the spiritual authority, the father, so to speak. But here, I believe he is using brothers differently. See, usually when you address the Sanhedrin court, you address them with, "O honorable high court of Israel." Paul didn't do that. Paul saying "brothers" would be like one of us in a courtroom addressing the judge on a first name basis. You don't do that, even if you know the judge. Paul is letting them know that he believes he is on equal status with them. He is a brother. And then Paul says something that offended them. According to Luke, his opening statement is, "I have lived my life before God." This phrase, before God, means with God's eyes fully on me. You and I know we can do things and hide from the eyes of some, but we can't hide from the eye of God. Paul is saying he has lived his whole life under the eyes of God with a good conscience up to that very day. How many of you could say that? That you have always exercised decisions according to the moral

compass you have inside you. Do you see what he is doing? He is stating his innocence, not before them but before God.

Paul Offends the High Priest

When Paul said that, Ananias, the high priest, commanded the ones who stood close to Paul to smack him...and they smacked him! Imagine being in a courtroom and saying something, and the judge tells the bailiff to smack you, and he slaps you. That would send a message to the other people in the courtroom. When Paul got smacked, he looked toward the high priest, and he said, "You whitewashed wall!" —*Are you going to judge me when you just broke the law by having me slapped?* Whitewashed wall was one of those sayings that had a meaning behind it. It was a reference to Israel's beliefs about being unclean by coming in contact with a dead body or a grave, and they couldn't participate in the ceremonial duties of being an Israelite. So they painted their tombs white so you could see the outside of the tomb, but on the inside of the tomb, there was no life; there was deadness. Remember, Jesus called the religious leaders of Israel whited sepulchers. He was saying they were hypocrites. And Paul just said to the high priest, the leading government official in the land from the religious political perspective of Israel...*You hypocrite! How dare you do what you did, because you just defied the constitution, you just defied the law!* Then, someone turned to Paul and said...*how dare you talk to Ananias that way!* Paul shrinks back and says...*I didn't know he was the high priest.* He then quotes the Old Testament because it taught you couldn't speak evil of your leaders.

Now, scholars aren't exactly sure what is going on here with Paul because they can't figure out how Paul wouldn't have known he was the high priest. Some try to make Paul being sarcastic here. Some try to make Paul further calling him out as a hypocrite. I don't think that is what Paul is doing. I think when Paul quotes Scripture here, he is saying he made a mistake—that he didn't know he was the high priest. How can he not know? Well, Paul has been gone from Jerusalem for about twenty years. I am talking about being in the religious affairs of Israel, and Ananias hasn't been serving that long as high priest. When Paul was with the Sanhedrin earlier, he was young; now he is old. We know from the book of Galatians

that Paul suffered with poor eyesight. Imagine Paul in a dimly lit room full of people who are prejudiced against him. He makes an opening statement, he hears a voice saying to smack him, and he gets smacked and he reacts. I don't think he knew it was Ananias because it was not his desire to break the law. If you read the Apostle Paul, you know that he respected government. He respected government because he viewed it as not being of man, but as being of God. He believed God had ordained for a man's best interest, as a group of people who congregate together, to be under authority—and he believed government was God's deacon, God's servant. Paul was raised as a Jew, so in accordance with the law he didn't speak evil of those men who were elected to be religious leaders. Can you imagine a group of Christian people under God (with God telling us what He tells us) speaking evil of our leaders? Not Paul. I mean, yes, government was just getting ready to beat him to within an inch of his life...and this religious and political government that he is now standing before (Israel was a theocracy not a democracy, not a socialist government, not a communist government) were so prejudiced against him that there was no way for him to get a fair trial; yet, he honored the leader because he felt to speak against him was to speak against God. I think he sincerely apologized. Listen to me. We may have brought our circumstances on ourselves, as I think Paul brought his on himself to a great degree, but at some point, we have to get over what we did. We can't continue to let our circumstances cause us to do things that are not right. That is what we see Paul doing. Yes, he may be in this because of his own choices, but he responds rightly to those around him and he honors the high priest.

Now, using my sanctified imagination here, I think Paul realizes pretty quickly that this is probably going to go the way he thought it would go because Luke tells us he made this assessment: the Sanhedrin was made up of Sadducees and Pharisees. William Barclay, a New Testament historian and a great scholar of biblical background, said the Sadducees believed in the written law and the Pharisees believed in the written law plus oral law. Basically, the Sadducees only believed in the first five books of the Bible. The Pharisees believed in those first five books, plus the historical books, and the prophetic writings. They also believed that

scholarly men could interpret those writings, so there were other writings that had been added so that you would know how not to break the law, or how to fulfill the law. The Pharisees brought themselves under all of that. Barclay said the Sadducees were liberal and the Pharisees were conservative. The Pharisees believed in predestination, and the Sadducees believed in human free will. The Pharisees believed in a resurrection, physically. They believed in angels. They believed in spirits. They believed in an afterlife, the Sadducees did not. So Paul notes that Israel's political religious leaders were divided by doctrine.

Division in the Sanhedrin Council

Remember earlier, Paul identified with the Romans as a Roman citizen, but now he identifies himself as a Jew, but not only as a Jew, he identifies with the Pharisees. When he addresses them, he says I am a Pharisee, son of a Pharisee, and I am on trial today because of the hope of the resurrection. Now, I don't know if Paul knew the response he would get. I hope not, because if he did know it he knew he was not going to get to do what he really wanted to do and that is tell people about Jesus—but the moment he said that, the place went crazy! Let's hope this could never happen in our lifetime, but a group of people meeting together, who were united that they were there for the benefit of others to rule Israel, is now divided because part of the group believes there is a resurrection from the dead and the other part doesn't; and Paul had made the issue the resurrection of the dead. So these government leaders of Israel, God's covenant people, can't make a decision because of their division. The Pharisees, who were in agreement that Paul shouldn't be doing what he was doing, are now defending him because he believes something that they believe! They are now fully behind him and wanting to get him freed! The Sadducees have forgotten why they were even there meeting in the first place, and they are now upset with the Pharisees—so they are arguing against Paul because of what they personally believe, based on what they believe is the Word of God. Imagine what life would be like if the group of people who were supposed to lead us were so divided that their division caused them not to be able to unite and make good, sound decisions for the whole, but especially for the individuals! What Luke is doing here is not an

accident—he is painting a man getting a fair shake to justice in a pagan government that he can't get among God's religious people.

The story is over. Paul didn't get to talk about the hope of the resurrection. He didn't get to tell that the only reason there is a life after death is because of Jesus. See, those Pharisees believed there was a life after death, but it only came to those who kept the law. They actually believed if they kept all six hundred and thirteen laws of Moses that they would usher in the Messianic Kingdom and the Messiah would come, and Paul can't now proclaim that the Messiah is Jesus! Without Jesus doing for us what we could not do for ourselves, we would not be in the resurrection of life, we would be in the resurrection of damnation. Paul didn't get to say... *The reason I have a story and my life is different is because when I met Jesus I was already dead, spiritually separated from God. I thought I was following my conscience, I thought I was going right, and I had no clue I wasn't.* This is what John Piper is trying to say about that verse—we were outside, blind, dark, no hope. Paul doesn't get to say that the gospel broke into his life and resurrected him from being spiritually dead to being spiritually alive. That because of this resurrection that is taking place in his life, he doesn't fear death because he knows death can't hold him down! Paul didn't get to tell his story. I don't think he was trying to save his neck here, but this group of people was so prejudice that they couldn't make a right decision.

Saved by the Pagan Government

Now, guess who saves him...the pagan government. The Roman tribune saves him and takes him back to the barracks. I want you to see the psyche of Paul. I don't think he is singing hymns here like he did in the Philippian jail. I think the full weight of this is on his shoulders and he is bearing the consequence. In verse 11, guess who Luke tells us stood by him—Jesus. It's one thing to have your fellow Jew on your side, but who you really need on your side is Jesus, and Jesus stands beside Paul. Luke paints this picture that Paul is not forsaken and Jesus is with him because whether he makes all right decisions was not the issue, Paul's desire was to further the gospel. And Jesus told His church that as we take the gospel to the ends of the earth, "I will be with you always, even unto the end of the

age." Paul is not forsaken. The Lord tells him, "Take courage, (Get your heart where it's supposed to be...change your attitude) for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." Get this picture...Paul is going to go to Rome, but it's going to be two years before he gets there. For the next two years, he is not going to be free; he is going to be bound. When he gets to Rome, he is still going to be bound for three more years. But in the midst of him being bound, he is free to do what God has called him to do, and that is bear witness. He will bear witness in Rome as a prisoner.

The Plot to Kill Paul Uncovered

Next, verse 12 says, forty Jews decide they are going to assassinate Paul. Can you imagine this? Israel is under Rome, the Roman government has rescued Paul. The Jewish government is not getting to do what they want to do, so forty Jews, people who believe they are God's covenant people, decide to take the law into their own hands and assassinate Paul. They go to the religious leaders and they authorize it, and then they come up with this plot. The religious leaders would ask for Paul to be brought back to settle the matter and get to the bottom of the problem, and they would stay in control this time. Then, when the Roman army brings him, unaware, these forty men would kill him. So they take a vow that they won't eat or drink until Paul is dead. In case you are thinking those men starved to death, they didn't. You could go back before the priest, and if the circumstances of your vow changed and you couldn't fulfill it, they would let you out of it.

Then, long story short, we meet Paul's nephew. Like me, Paul was glad he had a nephew. Did you know Paul had a sister? Not until you get to this chapter in the book of Acts because Paul never talks about his family in his writings, but verse 16 says the son of Paul's sister is in Jerusalem. He has a relationship, somehow, with the Sanhedrin because he overhears the plot. He goes to his Uncle Paul and tells him. I want you to see what Luke is doing here...Paul has a good reputation, not with the Jews but with the Romans, because they let his nephew visit him. His nephew tells him of the plot and Paul tells the centurion to take his nephew to the tribune to tell the story, and the soldier does it. Now, the tribune listens to Paul's

nephew—Luke says he takes him aside where there is nobody around, he listens to the story, and they unveil the plot.

Bound, But Free!

Guess what the tribune does for Paul, the guy who the Jewish crowd wants to kill—the tribune is going to get him to Felix the governor in the city of Caesarea where he started this whole thing! This is where the church told him not to go to Jerusalem, but he went anyway and he got himself into trouble because God had told him they wouldn't listen to him, and they didn't. He is now bound, the Jews are trying to kill him, now he is going to go back to Caesarea, but listen to this...is this the grace of God or what—two hundred foot soldiers, seventy soldiers on horseback, two hundred soldiers with spears—four hundred and seventy soldiers guarding this one guy! The Bible says they provided Paul a mount. Four hundred of these soldiers are having to walk the thirty-five miles to Caesarea, and Paul, the prisoner, doesn't walk; he rides...wow! Why? Because that is what government is supposed to do, they are supposed to defend its citizens, all of its citizens. It is supposed to make sure we are innocent until proven guilty, that every citizen gets a just hearing. Luke says the tribune wrote a letter and told the story, saying he didn't think Paul had done anything worthy of imprisonment and death. Paul arrives in Caesarea, and when this chapter ends, he is still bound but he is in Herod's palace, where the governor lives. He is bound there and we will see that he will be there for two more years—bound, not free; bound, but free. Don't tell me about your limitations...don't tell me about your circumstances...unless you are going to acknowledge that even in your circumstances of being bound because of decisions you have made, you have not canceled God's future for you. His future for you is to be a witness of Him. Are you a witness? Are you telling your story?