

## Acts 23 - John Karmelich

In my last lesson, I discussed the importance of a good attitude in a tough situation. The key point was we can't always control our circumstances, but we can always control our attitude. That leads me to my key point for this lessons: The necessity of encouragement. We all get moments when we hit a "wall". I would argue that at such times encouragement's a necessity. In this chapter Paul, (the main character of this part of the book) hit his wall! Keep in mind in the last few chapters of this book he was arrested on false charges, caused a riot, and attacked by an angry mob, all for preaching the Gospel. If that was me, I'd have hit a wall a long time before Paul did here!

OK John, you're talking to grown adults. All of us have had moments in our lives where we needed the type of encouragement that I'm sure Paul got in this chapter. The key moment to me is in Verse 11. In it God Himself provided encouragement at a really low moment in his life. No I've never had that from God Himself and I'm sure none of us have as well. Still I'm guessing that most of us have had times of despair where a friend helped us when we're "down in the dumps" and put this life in perspective to the situation we're dealing with at the moment. The reason this issue is important is not only do we all deal with tough times, but if we're going to use our lives to make a difference for Jesus, "bad stuff" will be a part of that issue. A willingness to encourage others and accept encouragement is a necessary aspect of living the Christian life but an important aspect of life in general. I know lots of people who like when they encourage others but hate when others try to help them. We need to be open "both ways". I know I'm preaching to the choir again, but it's important to bring up this subject.

With that speech out of my system, it's time for chapter details! The last we read of the main character Paul, he was arrested for starting a riot and rescued by Roman soldiers. Now he's facing a gathering of the top religious men in Israel. It is informal and was hastily arranged as the Romans didn't know what Paul said the crowd and they needed to know what to charge him with. Again a riot just ended, and the people who heard Paul speak in the last chapter were angry when they heard him say he went to preach the Gospel message to Gentiles (for all my newcomers, that is anyone who isn't Jewish). That message was offensive in the sense that it meant Judaism isn't necessary to be close to God and well, it upset all of these Jewish people in Jerusalem for a religious holiday.

Now it's probably the next day and Paul addresses the religious leaders, the group called the Sanhedrin. Paul was most likely a member of this group at one time. Remember this group has already heard Paul give the Gospel message to the assembly. Therefore before the Sanhedrin, he spoke about why he was arrested. The first thing Paul said was he stood in "good conscious before God" implying he can't think of any sin he needed to confess at that moment. Realize he is speaking to the Jewish religious top guys who were familiar with Christianity, as it was a growing movement in Jerusalem then. At that moment the high priest ordered someone essentially to sock Paul in the mouth! Paul reacted by saying in effect, "You're judging me by God's law and you struck me contrary to it! I'm allowed to give a defense!" In the defense of the striker he said, "Is that how you address the high priest?"

Keep in mind nobody was in formal get up! That's the most likely reason why Paul had no idea who is the high priest. (Some argue Paul had poor eyesight, but why Paul didn't know who he was is not a big deal so I'll let that debate die.) He was more scared he couldn't preach the gospel anymore as this group had the power to put him in prison. Then he thought of a way to divide the group. Keep in mind he was probably a member of this council at one time, so he knew what "buttons to push". He stated he was a Pharisee, a religious group in Israel that believes in afterlife and supernatural beings. About half of the

room were Pharisees and the other half were Sadducees. The latter are "rationalists", that is, they didn't believe in the afterlife or angels but just reacted to situations as man caused.

So Paul stated he was a Pharisee like his father before him, and he was on trial based on because he did believe in the resurrection of the dead! As most of us know, if you want "fireworks to fly" bring up the "hot button" and watch the debate go on! Remember the council knew who Christians were. Still Paul was defending the Pharisee position so they said, "Hey, maybe an angel (not Jesus of course) did speak to him!" By the way, the Roman soldiers who brought Paul in the room were watching this. When that fight broke out, all they knew was their orders were to keep the peace. They probably didn't understand the language but just saw the fight and figured, "The guy we brought in here was a Roman so we got to get him out of here safely". So they dragged Paul out of the room probably as the debate raged on.

The next night the text says that God spoke to Paul. Let's be honest here: Paul had to be really down in the dumps after all of this. Remember there were several attempts to kill him as he explained how God was working in his life. Notice God spoke neither to Paul when of the riots occurred nor during several attempts to kill him. Now Paul is really "down in the dumps" from dealing with this. Remember what he loved to do, go from place to place preaching Jesus. That's why God told him in effect, "I know you gave it your best shot here in Jerusalem and now you're going to testify about me in Rome." Paul didn't know how he was going to get to Rome but if God says it's so, "It is money in the bank"!

If all of this isn't strange enough, the next story is even weirder. The text says over 40 men made a vow not to eat or drink till they killed Paul. They approached the high priest (a Sadducee) and the leaders of the council who supported him and the leaders said in effect, "Go for it". Then we discover Paul has a nephew who heard of this plan! This is the only reference to Paul's family in the bible other than when he said his father was a Pharisee. The theory is that because Paul was a member of this council, he had to have been married at one time as it was a requirement to be on that council. Scholars argue when he became a Christian his family in effect "disowned him" but again it's just conjecture. Why his nephew was even around is speculation and I figured he was either around for the holiday or also was studying to be a Pharisee like uncle Paul in his old life. Whatever the reason "blood is thicker than water" so he told the Roman soldiers about the 40 men and their plot.

The Romans valued justice greatly. So they organized over 400 men to lead Paul 60 miles to what was their headquarters in Israel (the city of Caesarea). Paul would there get a chance to speak to the Roman leader of Israel (think of this guy as Pontius Pilate's replacement). We also get more details such as the fact they traveled late at night and some of the troops returned to Jerusalem when they got past the area of "danger" to Paul. All he knew was God said he would get to testify in Rome, so he will get a chance to speak to the governor (next chapter). It's also an opportunity to give the Gospel to the civil leader of Israel. The last part of the chapter was to prep for this event by asking where Paul was from. This was to make sure the governor had jurisdiction to rule on Paul.

In summary the chapter opens with Paul being on trial and the chapter ends with Paul waiting to be on trial again to a different audience. One must admit, this chapter would make some great movie scenes! To me, learning the details about Paul's history is interesting and I'm sure the author Luke interviewed a bunch of people to get the details right. I'm much more concerned about how we relate to this stuff. I love to ponder "why are these details in the bible?" I'd argue it's to remind us God's guiding us through our trials and finds way to encourage us during the toughest moments of our lives. Paul got encouraged at his toughest moments of his life. It's a reminder to encourage others as well as accept encouragement during our own trials.

With that said, on the same page where you downloaded this summary is a more detailed lesson on this chapter. That one is on a verse-by-verse basis. To read that, click on one of the other two links on this chapter. If you want, you are always welcome to e-mail me and I hope you like this. Thanks, John