

# UNSTOPPABLE

GOD'S WORK  
IN THE WORLD

VILLAGE BIBLE  
CHURCH

## THE UPS AND DOWNS OF WITNESSING

Lesson 19

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### DEVOTIONAL

One of the age-old questions is, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” I’m not going to answer that fully today. And it is not a question that finds a 100% final answer, as we are left at times to simply trust the truth stated in Scripture that God’s ways are higher than our ways. But I do mean to state it clearly today that there is not a one-to-one perfect correspondence to pleasant circumstances in our lives as perfectly representing God’s pleasure with us. And neither do all painful life circumstances correspond to God’s displeasure with us.

The passage today tells the story of the Roman commander’s total confusion with what truly comprised the story of this crazy guy named Paul. He determined to bring him before the Jewish leadership—the Sanhedrin—to gain some better information. They were not a part of the riot of the previous day, and surely, they could help him understand the nuances of various Jewish or Church groups.

So, Paul is brought before them to give a statement. His first sentence offends the high priest, who orders that he be slapped on the mouth. OK, you look at that and say, “Where’s the offense in that?” I’m not sure I can answer that one for you! All I can do is report that it happened, and Paul got whacked! Obviously, this irritates Paul and he reacts against the order with some pretty strong words. He is then made to realize that he is speaking to the high priest. For some reason, Paul did not realize this. There are two possible explanations: it might be that Paul’s eyesight was bad (this is speculated to be a physical condition from which he suffered, based upon a variety of Scriptures), or it may be that Paul simply did not know what the guy looked like and assumed he was not even there. In any event, Paul essentially apologizes. This is off to a bad start!

So, Paul changes course rather rapidly by throwing the entire Sanhedrin into an uproar by saying that he was being judged for the hope of the resurrection from the dead. What a sly political move! The Sadducees were the theological liberals who did not believe in such things as the resurrection or angels, etc. On the other hand, the Pharisees were the conservatives who affirmed these teachings, along with all of the Old Testament (and not just the writings of Moses). Paul’s move here would be sort of like someone yelling out in the U.S. House of Representatives that they were being excessively persecuted by the government because of a wrongful burden of unjust taxes! It was quickly clear to the Roman commander that he was going to learn nothing from this gang, and in fact he had to again rescue Paul from being torn to pieces like an old sock being pulled apart by two dogs in a tug-of-war.

The second part of [this week’s text] speaks about the uncovering and reporting of a plot to kill the Apostle Paul. A pretense was to be made to have Paul again come before the Sanhedrin, and to kill him as he was being transported. This leads into [next week’s text]. But to conclude today, look again at the statement of God to Paul in verse 11, “*Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.*” Paul’s unpleasant circumstances of gangs threatening to kill him, being beaten, and thrown into prisons... these events had nothing to do with Paul’s character or actions, but rather it related to a larger plan of God to use Paul in a bigger way. And so, not

every bad event that arrives on our doorsteps has necessarily something to do with errant behavior on our part; it may rather be God's sovereign intervention in our lives that finds its outworking in convoluted and circuitous paths—even some we don't appreciate... some that seem like we are lost and alone in the dark. Take heart; be faithful; serve God; trust him for clarity another day.<sup>1</sup>

## *OPEN IT*

1. Describe a time as a kid when you did something wrong and your conscience wouldn't let it go. What caused your conscience to be so active in that situation?

## *READ IT*

Acts 22:22-23:11

## *EXPLORE IT*

2. On what grounds did Paul get out of being flogged by the Roman Tribune?
3. To whom did the Roman Tribune send Paul to be interrogated?
4. What caused Paul to rebuke the Chief Priest?
5. What did Paul say that caused dissension within the Sanhedrin?
6. What would give Paul courage to stay faithful amidst such hostility?

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<sup>1</sup><https://devotionalstsf.org/2013/08/22/when-circumstances-dont-make-sense-acts-2230-2322/>

# APPLY IT

We pick up the story in 22:22. After Paul mentions his ministry to the Gentiles before the Jewish mob (v. 21), the riot resumes. To say this was a tough crowd would be a massive understatement. This unwilling audience wants to kill Paul! Both their words and actions express outrage (v. 23). Paul never even gets a chance to address the accusation that he had defiled the temple (21:28). Of course, as I. Howard Marshall says, “The real issue is not whether Paul defiled the temple, but whether Judaism was prepared to tolerate Christianity” (*Acts of the Apostles*, 360). It seems it was not. Paul, thankfully, is rescued from the mob (22: 24).

We then see how Paul continues to respond to more trials in Jerusalem in the remainder of our selected text (22:25–23:10). It’s not an easy task to understand or teach this passage because Paul’s actions are simply reported here. Luke offers no appraisal of them.<sup>2</sup>

## 7. Reread the text. What can we learn about the different characters in the story?

**The Crowd:**

**The Tribune:**

**The Sanhedrin:**

## 8. What can we learn about Paul and his response in light of the others’ actions? What one quality of Paul’s would you like to grow in?

## 9. What practical lessons can we learn from Paul’s response to such a difficult time?

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<sup>2</sup> Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 7636–7650). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

## **I HAVE RIGHTS!!!**

Paul had endured a hostile crowd and now was going to feel the pressure of the governing authorities. The Roman military did not waste their time with due process when it came to non-roman colonies. They just beat the truth out of you. That was the plan—beat the truth out of Paul—that is, until he shared that he was a Roman citizen by birth. Robert Girard shares the following facts about being a Roman citizen:

A Roman citizen was treated as if he were a resident of the city of Rome.

### Advantages of Roman Citizenship

- A Roman citizen was subject only to Roman courts and laws.
- A Roman citizen was protected from interrogation by torture or imprisonment before trial.
- A Roman citizen was free to travel anywhere in the empire he wished to travel.
- A Roman citizen was under the protection of the local Roman garrison in any city in the empire.

### Four Ways One Became a Roman Citizen

- By birth in a free Roman city, such as Tarsus or Philippi
- By birth to parents who were Roman citizens
- By having citizenship conferred in recognition of special service to the emperor or empire
- By bribing an official who could grant citizenship (This is how the tribune in Acts 22: 28 obtained it.)<sup>3</sup>

**10. What things would have been different had Paul shared about his citizenship earlier? Was he wise in waiting as long as he did to share this truth?**

**11. Paul used his national rights to his advantage as a Christian. What rights do we have that we should use to the advantage of the gospel?**

**12. Paul was brandishing some clout by declaring he was a citizen of the most powerful country in the world. What cautions must we as American Christians exercise as we engage the world?**

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<sup>3</sup> Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 4907-4913). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

## WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Paul encounters more hostility as Lysias sets him before the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin included the high priestly aristocracy and the ruling elders, who were mainly Sadducees. The minority of members were Pharisees, who were represented among the scribes (Polhill, *Acts*, 470). Paul “looked straight at” the Sanhedrin and offered his opening statement (23:1).

First, he notes his own character—his actions are upright. When it comes to defending the faith, our Christian character really matters (cf. 1 Timothy 1:5; 1 Peter 3:14–16). We come to Jesus for a clean conscience (Hebrews 10:22). Paul told the Corinthians, “I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me” (1 Corinthians 4:4). We should pursue a blameless life, and when we’re made aware of sin, we must humbly repent in order to maintain a good conscience and glorify God (see 24:16). No sooner did Paul testify to the uprightness of his own character than did the high priest, Ananias, command those near Paul to “strike him on the mouth” (23:2; cf. John 18:22). What a bizarre interruption! One would expect a leader in the Jewish high court to display civility and justice. Ananias’s response was totally unacceptable and unbiblical (see Leviticus 19:15), and it makes his character stand out in stark contrast to Paul’s.

Why such anger and aggression? First, Ananias thought Paul a wicked man. He thought him a troublemaker. But Paul wouldn’t admit to any guilt. In what he said, Paul didn’t mean that he was sinless but that he lived above reproach and that he had done nothing to provoke the riot (see Acts 25:8). This claim sounded absurd to Ananias, so he lost his temper. Second, Ananias was a wicked man. According to historical records, he was known for greed, a quick temper, violence, and pro-Roman sentiments.<sup>4</sup>

**13. Throughout his writings, Paul says numerous times and in numerous ways that all men are sinners and under the wrath of God. How then could he say in verse 1 that “he lived before God in all good conscience?” What does this mean for all Christians?**

...if we speak out for Christ, we should not be aware of any wrong that we have committed, either against God or men, that we have not repented of and made right. Otherwise, our witness will be used against the Lord and the gospel, because unbelievers will shrug us off as hypocrites. If you are not seeking to maintain a clear conscience before God and men, please do not let anyone know that you believe in Jesus! And, you may want to examine yourself to see whether you truly do believe in Him!<sup>5</sup>

**14. Paul’s life was being evaluated by what he said and did. What area do you struggle with most when it comes to your walk matching your talk?**

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<sup>4</sup> Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 7713-7720). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-59-ups-and-downs-witnessing-acts-2223-2311>

Self-examination Time: What are your actions saying? What do you do when you are alone, or when your plans are interrupted, or you are disappointed, or your weakness is exposed, or you're tempted to fear, or someone else prospers or [surpasses] you, or you're called on to help meet someone else's financial need? How much of a priority do you make your local church? How willing are you to serve obscurely? When those who are closest to you are honest, those who observe you in your unguarded, uncalculated moments, what do they hear from your actions?<sup>6</sup>

**15. When have you seen someone's conduct take away from their testimony?**

The assembly was definitely provoked by Paul's words (23:4). Paul responded to their outcry, citing Exodus 22:28 (v. 5). What should we make of this statement?

**The first main view is what I call the sincerity view.** It could be that Paul genuinely didn't know he was speaking to the high priest. Maybe (1) Ananias wasn't dressed with his religious garb since this wasn't a regular meeting of the Sanhedrin; (2) Paul didn't know who gave the order because of the commotion in the meeting; (3) Paul's eyesight caused him to see only a blurry white-robed figure; or (4) because Paul had been away from Jerusalem for so long, he didn't know Ananias.

**Another option is what we may call the sarcasm view.** Perhaps in his quip, Paul was using irony, as if to say, "Brothers, I see nothing priestly in this man" (Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 25:1; Calvin, "Christ the End of the Law," 318). If that is the case, Paul is here ministering in a prophetic sense. He first offers the rebuke, and then he makes this strong statement about Ananias's character.<sup>7</sup>

**16. Paul retorts back to the chief priest quite sharply in response to being slapped. Based on the commentary, what was the reason for his response and was he right in doing so?**

Matthew 5:38–40

<sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' <sup>39</sup> But I say to you, 'Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.'"

**17. How does one find a balance between the words of Jesus and the actions of Paul? When, if ever, is it right to fight when someone wrongs you?**

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-your-doing-saying>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Sanhedrin: The Motley Crue<sup>8</sup>

### The Majority: Sadducee Party

- High priestly aristocracy
- Roman sympathizers
- Accepted authority of only the Pentateuch
- Believed in human free will
- Denied existence of spirit world, angels, demons
- Denied life after death or resurrection
- A few became Christians (see Acts 6:7)

### The Minority: Pharisee Party

- Experts in Jewish law
- Silent protesters against Rome
- Accepted rabbinical traditions as authoritative
- Believed in predestination
- Believed in spirit world, angels, demons
- Believed in resurrection of the dead
- Many became Christians (see Acts 15:5)

**18. Take a look at the chart above. Both groups needed the gospel, but the approach taken to reach them is different. How might you go about reaching each group with the gospel?**

**19. Have you ever shared the gospel before an unfriendly and unbelieving audience? If so, what are some of the biggest challenges and struggles in doing so?**

It is not the Resurrection idea itself that drives people crazy. It is what the resurrection says about Jesus. A theoretical Jesus who exists on the level of ideas, religious traditions, institutional trappings, and history does not disturb most people. But a Jesus who died for the world's sins, rose from the dead, and presently lives in his followers, calling for real change in the way all people live—that Jesus cannot be ignored. That Jesus makes people mad.<sup>9</sup>

**20. Why was Paul's emphasis on the resurrection so important to his current situation? Why must we emphasize the resurrection when sharing the gospel?**

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<sup>8</sup> Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 4907-4913). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL

That night as Paul lay awake in bed, he was discouraged. Things had not gone well in Jerusalem. The church had not received his gift in the spirit that he had hoped. Then they got him involved in the scheme to look like a Law-keeping Jew, which led to his arrest and getting beat up. His witness before the Sanhedrin had not gone well. And the future looked uncertain and bleak. He didn't know if he ever would get to Rome, as he had hoped.

At that moment, the Lord Himself stood at Paul's side and said, "*Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.*" What words of encouragement and hope! I don't have time to give adequate attention to these words now, but I want you to see the grace and encouragement that the Lord extends to His servants. This was the fourth time that the Lord had appeared to Paul (9:4-6 & 22:14; 22:17-18; 18:9-10). Just when Paul needed it, the Lord came and spoke these words of encouragement.

If such appearances of Christ were rare for Paul, they are extremely rare (if at all) for the rest of us. I have heard stories of persecuted prisoners who have seen a vision of the Lord, and I do not doubt such experiences. But the normal way the Lord encourages us when we feel that we've blown it is by bringing us to an encouraging verse of Scripture, or through an encouraging word or note from someone who may not even know that we needed it at that moment. Our gracious Lord is aware of our discouragement and He wants us to be encouraged by the promise of His presence and the assurance that He will use us again in the future.<sup>10</sup>

**21. In what area in your life right now could you use some encouragement? In what ways can we experience the reassuring presence of Jesus on a daily basis?**

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<sup>10</sup> Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-59-ups-and-downs-witnessing-acts-2223-2311>

**Note: This study was compiled, and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. [www.villagebible.church/smallgroups](http://www.villagebible.church/smallgroups)**