

## Leveraging Your Assets

January 5, 2020

Acts 22:22-23:11

This morning we return to our study of the book of Acts. At this point in the life of the early church our focus is on Paul. He has left the mission field, where his most productive ministry was to Gentiles, non-Jews, people like us. He has felt compelled to go back to Jerusalem, knowing from God that hardship, persecution was awaiting him there. But out of obedience to God, Paul has gone.

Upon his arrival, he connected with the believers in Jerusalem and did what he needed to do to remain in the good graces of the local Jewish population and Jewish Christians. And yet, he was not received by them on that basis. They see him in the temple courts, wrongly accuse him of bringing “those people” unclean Gentiles like you and me into the temple. The angry mob attempts to kill him. He finds refuge with the Roman soldiers attached to the temple complex.

The Roman authorities allow him to speak to the angry mob. Paul simply gives his testimony, telling how he had lived as a zealous Jew, but was met by Jesus on the road to Damascus, where he was stopped from his mission to seek out and detain or kill Christians. There he was blinded, led by the hand to a place where he could be instructed by these very Christians he had sought to kill. It was God who stepped in and told him to stop persecuting Jesus and His followers. It was God who sent him on a mission to preach good news to Gentiles. He was simply being obedient to God.

This is where we pick up the story. Paul has told his story to the assembled angry mob in front of the Roman authorities. But as you might imagine, his speech did not quell the disturbance. Follow along as I read the next steps in the unfolding drama. Know that this really is two separate stories

that I am taking as one. The larger point I am trying to make is seen in both of them together. READ Acts 22:22-23:11.

Main point: Use everything you are and have to advance the Kingdom and glorify God.

God is efficient. He doesn't waste time, nor assets. He has directed your life in whatever way He has for a purpose. He knows everything and will use everything about you to accomplish His purposes. I see that here in Paul's use of both his Roman citizenship and his history as a Pharisee. God used those assets, those true facts about Paul to suit His purposes.

I hope you can see where this is headed. It is my belief that He has directed my life in order to utilize my various experiences, attributes, successes and failures to accomplish His purposes. He intends on using them all. My frustrations and failure at selling a house about 35 years ago and the lessons I learned from it has given me an asset that I have shared with countless people since then. So, my failure has led to advancement in the Kingdom, not only for me but for many others. I believe the same thing about you. If you are a child of God, then you are the bearer of assets that He intends to use for the building of His Kingdom. You may not consider such things as assets, let alone assets that can be used to advance His Kingdom, but I assure you that He does.

So, as we read these two plot development stories, I urge you to begin the process of releasing your tight grip on your assets, many of which you do not even consider things of value, some of which you desire to hide in shame. You might not value them, but God does and will use them, if you release them to Him. (2 parts)

I. God gives us assets from even before birth to suit His purposes. vv. 22:22-29

Here, Paul is able to draw on his birthright to Roman citizenship to prevent certain pain and hardship and possible death. In other words, I see here a principle that Paul's life and purpose had been arranged even before birth with this attribute or right being just what he would need many years later. This asset Paul received by way of birth.

v.22- Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."

Now remember, these things are being said by an angry mob of Jews on the grounds of the temple. They pronounce Paul guilty of crimes deserving of death. They have in essence pronounced him guilty. They have pronounced the intended sentence: death. Just as was true with Jesus, they needed no trial, no witnesses, no evidence, to them it was self-evident that Paul was guilty and deserving death. Wait! These are Jews! This is not how the Jewish system of justice was designed to work. In other words, their actions showed their hearts. They may have said that their concern was in upholding the tenets of the Jewish faith, but their actions showed clearly that they were motivated by anger, hatred, and rage, and their desire was to pour out all that hate on Paul. These were not good men zealous for good. These were bad men pretending to be good men, intent on acting on their hatred but hoping to do so under the cloak of godliness. What wickedness on display!

23 And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, 24 the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this.

This put the Roman authority in a predicament. Before him was an enraged mob of religious zealots. The target of their rage was a man right in front of him, one of their own. He claims to have done nothing wrong. They claim he does not deserve to even live. Who's right? How can he find out?

Well, he orders what he probably usually ordered in such situations: interrogation by torture. Take the man at the center (who is probably guilty), torture him until he tells the truth and confesses to his crime. That is how justice too often works, both then and now: you torture them, threaten them, threaten those around them. Lest you think it is unfair and even barbaric (and it is), it often happens even now, even here, even at the highest level of our government. If you've been paying attention, there are many people who were unfairly treated, threatened, prosecuted, persecuted, hoping that they would flip and give the authorities the information they sought. This is not the exception, this too often is the norm.

In Paul's case, it was flogging, the same thing they did to Jesus. It involved leather strips with pieces of bone or stone tied to the end to rip into the flesh. It was considered much worse than being whipped or beaten with rods. They were about to inflict the worst punishment imaginable in order to see if Paul was hiding something criminal.

25 But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" 26 When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen."

Here is where we come to the pivotal moment in the event. Unlike in our society, the Roman empire had many people under it, but relatively few citizens of it. There were many Roman subjects, but few Roman citizens. Citizenship was a badge of honor, something of great value with corresponding privileges. One of

them was the protection from such torture to elicit information. You could use those methods for others, but not for Roman citizens. I love Paul's use of the question. He did not demand, he simply asked a question, a question to which he already knew the answer.

27 So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." 28 The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth." 29 So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

There was no identifying mark for citizenship, and one would not have papers on him. Instead, they all knew the penalty for falsely claiming citizenship was death. And you might just have to prove it by producing papers. But it led to an interesting conversation between Paul and the Roman authority. The Roman had to pay (bribe) a great sum of money to receive that asset. Paul had his by birth. Given that Paul was from Tarsus, it would appear likely that some ancestor had done something valuable for the Roman government and they honored him with citizenship, which would then be able to be passed down generationally. In other words, Paul's citizenship was not due to anything he had done, but something of value done by a forefather. In other words, God had arranged long ago for Paul to have an asset that he would need precisely for such a time as this. God knew before Paul's birth that he would need this asset at this time. Can you how God utilized a generational asset to advance His Kingdom?

## II. God utilizes lifestyle choices to advance His Kingdom. vv. 22:30-23:11

In this case, it was a perspective on the Jewish faith and the lifestyle that came from that perspective. God used Paul's history of being a Pharisee to perhaps save his life. Pause: isn't it interesting that God used the very thing that led Paul to do really, really bad things to Christians to save his life? Or, isn't it

interesting that Jesus' main foes were the Pharisees, and yet here a generation later, it was an association with the Pharisees that saved the life of His servant? This is how God works with His assets: He will use them as He sees fit, when it best suits His purposes.

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.

Now that Paul was known to be a Roman citizen, the official was back to his problem. He still needed to find out whether the mob was right or Paul was right. Since the issue at hand seemed to be of a religious nature, he ordered a convening of the highest Jewish authorities in the land: the Sanhedrin, or the Council. This would have been the equivalent of the Jewish Supreme Court and Congress all rolled into one. This body would speak for the Jewish faith. Put Paul in front of this group, hold a trial while the Roman authority listened in, and then he would be able to determine what was truly going on...or so he thought! Remember, he just gave Paul another audience with the very people Paul was passionate to persuade. And too many of them gave him no credibility. They were a divided body, but they were united in their hatred of Paul.

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

Notice Paul refers to them as brothers, the appropriate salutation for such a proceeding. He still considered himself one of them. He was not their enemy, he was their brother. But then he made the mistake of giving an assessment of his life: was he a good Jew or a rebel? He declares himself to be at peace with

God. He is content with his life. This does not mean Paul did not see himself as a sinner. Rather, the issue at hand was whether Paul was living in rebellion against the God of Abraham. They said he was, so much so that he did not deserve even to live. Paul's perspective was that his conscience was clear. He was at peace with Israel's God. At this the chief priest told those near him to strike him in the face. How dare he blaspheme God by declaring that he, an obvious rebel, was living in a way pleasing to God!

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?"

Paul's response here was to verbally lash out at one who gave the order. These men sat as judges, predisposed with the idea that Paul was a rebel deserving severe punishment. And yet, they themselves would take unjust action against one falsely accused. He responded by declaring in a very human way that they were guilty of the very thing they accused him of doing. As a spokesman for God, Paul was invoking God's judgment upon them. How do you suppose this was going to go over, since they were the ones who were authorized to speak with supposed highest authority for God???

4 Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?" 5 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 that, Paul was taken to task for speaking ill about the high priest. Now, this has led to various conclusions about what must have taken place here. How could Paul not know who the high priest was? Was he literally blind? Was he being sarcastic? Well, there are several factors to consider. First, this was not

a meeting of the Sanhedrin, where the high priest would have been the one known to run the meeting. This was a meeting called by the Roman authority made up of the Sanhedrin. He would have been in charge, not the high priest. Second, Paul had not been living in Jerusalem for some time and would not have been up to date on who was in charge or what he looked like. Third, as was true even during Jesus' trial, there were more than one who could on any given day be acting as the high priest. It was held in families, and various members of the family shared the role and responsibilities. So it could be that Paul didn't recognize him, didn't know him, or didn't know that he was speaking in that capacity. Whatever is the case, Paul acknowledges that he should have not spoken against God's appointed leader. That would be against the law, specifically Exodus 22:28. Again, we see the irony of Paul's repentance toward the authorities who were wrongly accusing him. Who is right and who should be asking for forgiveness? Clearly, Paul was not living a life of rebellion against Israel's God. He was submissive even when being wrongly accused.

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."

This is one I always smile when studying. Paul is being wrongfully accused in a setting of highest authority where all are united in their opposition to him. So what does he do? He divides the group! He brings up one of the major issues that divides the group. He aligns himself not only as one of them, but with one particular side of the aisle. In doing so, he instantly shifts the focus off of himself and onto them. As much as they hated Paul, they hated each other even more.

The issue he chose to highlight was the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees believed in it, while the Sadducees believed that once you died, you

died. There was no future for the body, no expectation of reuniting body and spirit. The spirit lived on and the body was done.

Pause: this is also why the Christian tradition has been to bury rather than burn their dead. There is present and future value for the human body, even though there is no life in it. Burying the dead gives testimony to the reality of the resurrection. You see it throughout Scripture and throughout history. They carried Joseph's bones back to the Promised Land. Food for thought. Resume.

In this case, Paul was speaking much truth in what he said. Paul was on trial essentially for being a follower of Jesus, who rose from the dead. As Paul would write in I Corinthians 15, if there was no resurrection from the dead, if Jesus did not resurrect from the dead, then we are all wasting our time. To be a follower of Jesus, you must believe in the resurrection of the dead. Paul was not just stirring up an issue, he was speaking a core truth.

7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. 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?"

I love this scene. Paul instigated a fight on this pristine official meeting of the highest authorities. If I were preaching this sermon in London, I would say it was a scene right out of the House of Commons. Here, I would say it sounds like the House of Representatives, or perhaps soon the Senate. Now we Nebraskans have the only unicameral with no division by party, so we are exempt, right? Nebraska nice, you know!

But with Paul, all of a sudden these Pharisees had a newfound respect for Paul. Maybe Paul was receiving messages from the Spirit of God or an angel???? He shifted the focus to one where half of the group would be on his side. Who

are we to automatically assume he is being rebellious against God? Notice the author is explaining the beliefs, assuming his readers would not automatically know what the Pharisees and Sadducees believed. So, these Pharisees and Sadducees were more united in their party beliefs than they were in their hatred against Paul. Isn't it interesting that Paul had the one precise asset he would need for this precise moment? He had lived a life of zealousness toward the Law as a Pharisee, a zealousness that would cause him to sin greatly against God and the people of God. And yet God used this to allow him to escape the hands of an angry mob? Can you see my point, that God uses our assets when it best suits His purposes, sometimes even assets we are not particularly proud of?

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. 11 The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."

Once more, the Roman official is forced to act as the protector of Paul, preventing him from being ripped apart. And he was no closer to finding out the truth about the situation. He probably left there that day saying, "These people are all crazy!"

But Paul must have left there wondering what was to become of him. Clearly the threat against him was large, deep, and it seemed only a matter of time before his life would be over. His vision to minister in Rome and parts west in the Roman empire were seemingly coming to an end. I draw this conclusion because the text tell us that Jesus showed up in his life that night (whether in person or in a dream or vision we cannot be sure) to testify to him that he would indeed fulfill his vision to testify about Jesus in Rome. His life would not end here in Jerusalem. I suspect Paul needed that assurance at that point and would certainly need it in the days ahead, for as we know the story goes on. . . .

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will spend some time with God giving over to Him the assets entrusted to us.

2) We might look back at our lives with regret, but we will allow God to use those lives to honor Him.

3) We will look for opportunities to utilize those assets for the advancement of His Kingdom.

4) We will see ourselves as children of the resurrection, with a hopeful, hope filled perspective on the future.