God's Grace on Paul's Life as he Served Christ

Acts 23

May 15, 2015

Introduction: The Blessings of Serving the LORD

In Acts 23 we see more of God's grace in Paul's life. Grace which allowed Paul to serve Christ.

As Paul lived his life and served Christ, He did so with…

I. A clear conscience (v.1)

As Paul lived his life and served Christ, He did so with…

II. Boldness & wisdom of speech (v.2-5)

A. Boldness of Speech (v.2-5)

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B. God places a nephew at the right place at the right time (v.12-22)

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When we take care of God's business, He will take care of ours!

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Introduction:

The Blessings of Serving the LORD
Galatians 6:9 - And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.

Some encouragement for weary servants:

1. Serving the Lord…Returns the Greatest Gratitude
   Hebrews 12:28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;

2. Serving the Lord…Fulfills Life's Greatest Purpose
   1 Cor. 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

3. Serving the Lord…Meets People's Greatest Needs
   2 Corinthians 5:18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,;

4. Serving the Lord…Taps into the Greatest Power
   Col. 1:29 For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

5. Serving the Lord…Receives the Greatest Honor
   John 12:26 If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him

6. Serving the Lord…Pays the Greatest Rewards
   1 Corinthians 3:14 If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward.

7. Serving the Lord…Fills the Heart with the Greatest Joy
   1 Thessalonians 2:19 For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?
   John 15:11 These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

After the Apostle Paul had finished his third missionary journey (having ministered in Macedonia, Greece, and Ephesus) he returned to Israel (via boat to Caesarea). In every city he was warned of persecution that awaited him in Jerusalem. (See: In Ephesus - Acts 20:22-24; At Caesarea – Acts 21:10-14).

In Acts 21, Paul was seized in the Temple by some Jewish Zealots from Asia Minor. He requests the Roman Commander to address the people of Jerusalem, which He did in Acts 22 (giving his salvation testimony). As soon as he spoke of this ministry to the (despised) Gentiles, the people raised their voices and said "away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!" (22:22). An uproar started in the city of Jerusalem. Upon this, the Commander of the barracks (the Antonia Fortress, situated next to the Temple) commanded Paul to be whipped until he gave the reason why he people were so upset about him. After hearing that Paul was a Roman citizen and that it was illegal to beat him, the Commander released Paul and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble with Paul present so that he could find out what Paul was guilty of. Acts 23 is Paul's defense before the council.

In Acts 23 we see more of God's grace in Paul's life. Grace which allowed Paul to serve Christ.

As Paul lived his life and served Christ, He did so with…

I. A clear conscience (v.1)

"Looking intently at the council" – When you have a guilty conscience, you tend to look away; You can't look people in the eye. Paul however, could look them in the eye as he had done his "best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men." (Acts 24:16).

"Brethren" – Not spiritual brethren, but ethnically related to Paul (fellow Jews).

"I have lived my life…" – Practical Christian living. Not mere theoretical, but practical.

"with a perfectly good conscience" – As Paul lived his life (even prior to salvation), he sought to serve God with a clear conscience. There was no duplicity in Paul. He was real, genuine, and non-hypocritical.

A "conscience" simply refers to someone's "consciousness" of ethical or moral laws.

"In Paul's thought, conscience – a clear conscience, a good conscience – is foundational to ministry. Three times in his Pastoral Letters he referenced conscience, urging 'love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith' (1 Timothy 1:5). He said that church leaders 'must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience' (1 Timothy 3:9). Substantiating his own ministry he said, 'I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors with a clear conscience' (2 Timothy 1:3). The rest of the New Testament testifies to Paul's empowerment through 'a good conscience.' He courageously took his stand before the Sanhedrim, looked them straight in the eye and declared 'Brothers I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day' (Acts 23:1). And standing before Governor Felix he confidently declared ' So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man' (Acts 24:16).
To the Romans Paul voiced his amazing affirmation of love for his people as true because it was spoken with a clear conscience: 'I am speaking the truth in Christ---I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit' (Romans 9:1)." (Hughes p. 39)

“Paul faced his critics many accusations against his character and integrity (thy had accused him of being proud, self-serving untrustworthy, being proud self-serving untrustworthy and inconsistent mentally imbalanced incompetent,,,,, unsophisticated, and an incompetent preacher) by appealing to the highest human court--- his conscience” (John MacArthur, Study Bible note p. 1764).

The conscience is “the soul’s warning system, which allows human beings to contemplate their motives and actions and make moral evaluations of what is right and wrong” (MacArthur Study Bible, p. 1764).

Definition:
English "conscience": "con" = along with; "scio" = to know
Greek "συνειδησις" ("suneidesis"): "sun" = with; "oida" = to know

Hence, the word means "to know with" - to have a "co-knowledge" with oneself (Vine, p. 228).
Man, being created in the "image of God," has an intuitive ("oida") awareness or "consciousness" of: 1) self 2) God and 3) morality

Everyone, even unregenerate man, has a basic awareness of the moral law of God. No matter where you travel in the world, you will always find people with an inner sense of right and wrong (a moral standard). This basic awareness or consciousness is based upon truth that God has written upon every man's heart (via creation).

This "conscience" is man's power to judge or make a moral decision about whether something is right or wrong.

SEE: Romans 2:14-15. Bible truths about the conscience:

a. All men have a conscience
Rom. 2:14 - "Gentiles . . . do by nature")
"Do by nature" = to do something instinctively; or without being taught by men.

b. Man's conscience basically gives either a Yes or No answer (Rom. 2:15)

The conscience will either "accuse" (say, "No, definitely not, that is contrary to God's Law).
Or it will "excuse" (say, "Yes, that is permissible or allowable, I will do that, it is in accordance with God's standards).

c. The conscience functions like a mediator between man's "heart" (with its written law code) and the "thoughts" (reasonings which instigate one's action and will)

d. The conscience does not legislate law (make the rules), but merely interprets it

Example: Like a judge, the conscience either approves or disapproves based upon the moral knowledge (law or standard) it has available.
1) The Law (standard) ----2) The *Judge ----3) The Verdict

Example: Like a referee, the conscience receives the rules from the rule book and sends a message to our thoughts (reasonings), saying either:
"Fair" or "Foul"
"Safe" or "Out"
"Yes" or "No"

1) The Rule book ----2) The *Referee ----3) The Call or Decision

No one should ever violate or go against his/her conscience

Examples:
1) Paul's clear conscience before God and men (Acts 23:1, 24:16; II Tim. 1:3)
2) The citizen's obedience to government (Rom. 13:5)
3) The believer's questioning eating meat offered to idols (I Cor. 8:7-12)
4) The deacons who serve the Lord (I Tim. 3:9)
5) The believers who suffer for Christ (I Pet. 2:19; 3:16, 21)

Beware: A conscience can be defiled (Titus 1:15) or seared (I Tim. 4:2) by deliberately

1) Defiled=Stained, polluted, impure (the conscience does not function right)
2) Seared=Cauterized; made insensitive, numbed (the conscience does not function at all)

Paul's statement to the Corinthians regarding his conscience:

For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you. 2 Corinthians 1:12-14

In 2 Corinthians 1:12-14, Paul's conscience was clean in regards to :

1. His Motives (v.12a – "simplicity")

"Simplicity" – singleness; undivided motives; one motive – that being to please and glorify God.

(cp. 2 Cor. 8:2; 9:13)

Singleness of heart describes a oneness of purpose (not a divided heart; cp. Mt. 6:22; Lk. 11:34)

[Note: The variant reading of "holiness" fits the context but not as appropriately as the T. R.'s "singleness" (or simplicity). The association of thought with the word "sincerity" (genuineness) best fits with the idea of being single-minded (without multiple motives).]

2. His Sincerity (v.12b – "Godly sincerity")

"Godly sincerity" –

"Sincerity" = eilikrineia (from eili = light; and krineia = to judge). Lit. to judge from light.

The word was used of holding vessels (ceramic jars or containers) up to the light to see whether or not there were cracks that had been re-glued. If the jar had had a fracture and was reattached, the light would reveal it.

The "light" that revealed Paul's "sincerity" was God (hence, "Godly sincerity" or literally: sincerity of God; sincerity that was produced and revealed by God).

3. His Wisdom (v. 12c – "not fleshly wisdom")

Paul's conscientious ministry and conduct was not a product of "fleshly wisdom" (it was not a human manufactured insight and skill) but it was the production of God's grace.

Any good conscientious ministry that we do is of God's unmerited kindness and favor. He does the work in us and through us.

4. His Conduct (v. 12-13)

a) His conduct in the World (v.12)

"Conversation" – manner of living; lifestyle; conduct; a principled behavior.

Paul had a clear conscience that he had behaved himself with pure motives and genuineness both "in the world" (with the lost) and "to youward" (with the saved).

Such consistency should mark every one of us. We should not live one way in the presence of the saints and another way in front of those without Christ.

We should have a clear conscience regarding our behavior . . .

--at church and at home
--with ministerial service and at secular work
--with Christians and with non-believers
--with saints and with sinners

b) His conduct with the Believers (v. 12-13)

"More abundantly" - especially; with more attention to details.

Why would Paul be even more conscientious with the Corinthian believers?

Basically for the same reason we are to “do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10).

For a conscientious soul-winner, it is sometimes easier to let our guard down in front of the saints thinking: “They will understand”; “they will forgive,” etc. But just as “charity begins at home,” so our best behavior should be “at home” with God’s people.

The Corinthian saints were Paul’s fruit (v. 14); he did not want to harm the fruit God gave him.

How clear is your conscience about your conduct both in the world and in the church?

Do you have a clear conscience regarding:

--Your use of time
--Your treatment of others
--Your speech
--Your service (lesson preparation; prayer, etc.)

You can’t have joy and at the same time have a bothered conscience (i.e. an inner voice that is screaming out because of a violation you are allowing in your life).

The Christian’s conscience is the Holy Spirit’s voice (who is bearing witness to your human spirit – cp. Rom. 8:16).

You can’t be Spirit-filled while acting contrary to your conscience.

As Paul lived his life and served Christ, He did so with…

II. Boldness & wisdom of speech (v.2-5)

A. Boldness of Speech (v.2-5)

Thinking he was doing right under God, Ananias orders Paul to be smitten.

What boldness: "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!" – Vengeance is mine; I will repay says the LORD! Paul accuses Ananias of seeking to uphold the Mosaic Law by having Paul condemned by it, and at the same time Ananias breaks the Law by having Paul smitten without a fair and just trial.

"I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest" – Why was Paul unaware?

Eyesight problem (Possibly his thorn in the flesh) – 2 Cor. 12:7-10

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me--to keep me from exalting myself!
Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.
And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Because of the overflowing abundance of direct revelations from God, Paul may have encountered the human temptation of spiritual pride. To prevent this from occurring to Paul's ruin, God in love gave him a physical affliction.

I believe that Paul's "thorn" was a recurrent physical ailment.

--Recurrent because it had now been 14 years since he received his visions and revelations.

--Physical because it is said to be in his "flesh"

--Ailment – apparently something that affected his ability to function and which might negatively affect his visible appearance.

While several suggestions have been offered as what exactly his problem was, Paul chose to leave it unstated so that all of us could apply the "thorn in the flesh" principle to our own situations and circumstances. However, if I was to make a guess as to what his problem was, I would say it was a form of ophthalmia or eye trouble (SEE: Gal. 4:12-15).

Perhaps Ananias was hidden in the crowd (with all of the commotion going on, when he gave the order to strike Paul, perhaps, Paul did not know who gave that order).

Regardless, Paul acknowledges the need to obey God's Word which says: "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people"

Ananias the High Priest, "was the son of Nebedeus and as a Sadducee held the office from c. A.D. 47-58, but then was removed from office. He was known for his greed, wealth, and brutality and was murdered in A.D. 66 by the Zealots because of his friendliness with the Romans (Linguistic Key, p. 293).

B. Wisdom of Speech (v.6-10)

Paul with skill and wisdom of words diverted the attention to the topic he wanted the discussion to go (the Resurrection). Recognizing opposing forces in the room (the Sadducees and the Pharisees v.6), he identifies himself as a Pharisee and states the purpose for which he was on trial (the resurrection, through Christ).

Two religious groups:

Religious Liberals (the Sadducees) – who denied the supernatural, angels, life after death, resurrection etc.

Religious Legalists (the Pharisees) – the self-righteous, holier than thou, "keepers of the Mosaic Law"

The Sadducees denied the supernatural – "that is why I am so Sad-You-See"
The Pharisees were the self-righteous – "that is why I am so Fair-You-See"

Paul with skill of speech, turns the opposing forces against each other! Who gave him such insight? God did.

His real purpose however, was to teach the resurrection of Christ and of the believer.

v.9 – Amazing how in the heat of the moment, one side (who sided with Paul on the concept of the Resurrection) was willing to acknowledge him as faultless and possibly a recipient of divine revelation via a spirit or angel.

v.10 – A "tug of war" with Paul as the rope ensued.

Lest Paul should be torn in two, the commander orders him to be brought back to the barracks.

As Paul lived his life and served Christ, He did so with…

III. God's Providential Protection (v.11-34)

A. God gives Paul an encouraging promise of future ministry (v.11)

"The Lord stood at his side" – Remember, that the Lord is with all who obey the great commission ("and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" – Mt. 28:20)

"and said" – God does not give us such direct revelation, but comforts and directs via the written word of God, the Bible.

"take courage" - be brave; be courageous; Have confidence; Don't be afraid. God is in the business of calming fears by His precious Word!

Paul would know God's will in advance; We know it in hind-sight (after the fact).

The ministry you have done in Jerusalem, you will also do in Rome.

More work to be done, Paul. Jesus said. That's why we are on this earth. To accomplish the Master's mission. To fulfill His will and purpose.

Illustration: The rusty tool. May I be a useful tool in your hand Lord. Use my life to bring others in contact with the saving Gospel.

No one can end your life until God is finished with it!

B. God places a nephew at the right place at the right time (v.12-22)

A 40 man conspiracy. They vowed (before God) to not eat or drink until they had killed Paul. It's amazing to see the great lengths the enemies of Christ will go to in their attempt to silence or exterminate God's message and messenger.

I seriously doubt that they fasted to the point of death. They could not go more than a few days without water! I'm sure they got around their oath.

v.15 – These Jews practice deceit while supposedly seeking to honor God. What inconsistency.

v. 16 – How did Paul's Sister's Son learn of this plot to ambush Paul? The text does not say. However, God has a way of getting information to people at just the right time. Example: Mordecai's learning of a plot to kill king Ahasuerus (Xerxes) would eventually save his life and the lives of his people! (Book of Esther 2:21-23)

In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.
But the plot became known to Mordecai and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name.
Now when the plot was investigated and found to be so, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence.

Note: though God's name is not mentioned once in Esther, His sovereign hand is evident all throughout the book!

If you have ever been to a Broadway play, or better yet to Sight and Sound, you have to be impressed with all the work that goes on behind the scenes --- Those often over-looked include the directors, choreographers & music directors, make-up artists, those who make the props, the state crew who set it all up, the sound crew. What happens on the stage is minor compared to what happens behind the scenes.

So it is on the stage of life. We see the actors. What we don't see is the sovereign working of an Almighty God making moves in the angelic realm . . . in the realm of the heart, motive and desires. . . creating the abrupt disturbances that alter direction of people and nations.

God is in sovereign control, continually working behind the scenes for His Glory and purpose!

C. God uses the lost heathen to protect God's man (v.23-35)

God uses the heathen, Roman Commander to urgently organize 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen (470 in all, 1/3 of the armed forces of the entire city) to protect 1 man, Paul. Now that is a lot of bodyguards!

"the third hour" – 9:00 p.m. (according to Jewish reckoning of the start of the new day at 6:00 p.m.) So they will move Paul in the dark of night (to further hide him from those out for his blood). They will go to Antipatris (the ancient city of Aphek about 26 miles south of Caesarea).

> When Herod the Great became king (37-4 BC), he rebuilt Aphek and named the city Antipatris after his father Antipater. Archaeological work has revealed the city's Cardo, with shops on both sides of this main street. After Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, the Romans spirited Paul out of the city to avoid a plot on the apostle's life (Acts 23). The contingent of troops brought him to Antipatris (about halfway) before continuing on the next day to Caesarea. The city was destroyed in AD 363 by an earthquake.
> (http://www.bibleplaces.com/aphek.htm)

Governor Felix would have Paul brought to Caesarea to have a hearing with his accusers present. He would spend the night in King Herod's Praetorium (this was the governor's official residence; the "best hotel accommodations" in the land! This was Herod's Mediterranean Sea Side Palace!).

Paul would be brought to the Roman Governor of Judea, Antonius Felix. Paul will be moved up the line to superior powers, until his is finally in Rome.

Paul would be handed on from Claudius Lysias to Felix; then from Felix (who died) to Porcious Festus; Then from Festus to King Agrippa. Then from King Agrippa to Rome (as Paul appealed to Caesar himself).

Note: Each of these would hear the Gospel from Paul. Paul was not interested in his protection, he was interested in God's Gospel.

When we take care of God's business, He will take care of ours!

God protected Paul. And he used the unsaved to do so.