

Losing Your Cool

Acts 23

Introduction

Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem several decades ago, with some rather famous lines to it. It was a poem entitled *If*, that he wrote to young men who wanted to grow up to maturity.

*If you can keep your head when all about you
are losing theirs and blaming it on you;*

*If you can trust yourself when all men doubt
you, but make allowance for their
doubting too;*

*If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
or, being lied about, refuse to deal in lies;*

Or, being hated, don't give way to hating. . .

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your
virtue . . . you'll be a man, my son.*

Perhaps the best known line of this poem is the first line. It says, in effect, you have arrived, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you". Anyone like that has certainly moved into an elite company of people of whom you would hear yourself say, "Man, they've got it together."

If there was anyone in the New Testament that you would say had it all together, it would be Paul. If there was anyone who could keep his head when everyone else around him was losing theirs, it was Paul. But even Paul lost his cool.

In fairness to Paul, let us refresh our memories with the events of what must have been one of the toughest weeks of his life. In Acts, chapter 21, Paul is misunderstood and maligned by the believing Jews who were in the church. He later went to the temple where a riot broke out, and he is beaten by a mob,

bound in chains, while the crowd screams for his death, and is nearly flogged by the Romans.

The Council Is In Session!

Now, in chapter 23, Paul finally stands before the Sanhedrin, or the Jewish supreme court.

Paul's conscience is clean

Paul lets the Council know that his conscience is clean. Look at verse 1.

***Paul, looking intently at the Council, said,
"Brethren, I have lived my life with a
perfectly good conscience before God up to
this day."***

Stop at this point. Paul does a couple of things that, in light of what is about to happen, were not the wisest things to do.

First of all, he addressed the Supreme Court as if they were his peers – he called them, "Brothers." Jewish protocol tells us that the normal beginning when addressing the Sanhedrin started with, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel."

In a sense, Paul was right; he was their peer. He himself had served on the Sanhedrin as a fellow member. He knew many of these men well!

His opening statement, however, helped create the impression that Paul was disrespectful of this august body.

The second thing Paul did was begin his defense by pointing to his good conscience. I believe, in hindsight, Paul would have rather have launched right into the truth of the gospel, just as he had done earlier in the temple.

Make no mistake, however, this is a wonderful statement to make. Paul is not saying, "I'm perfect," but is simply saying, "I have kept a short account with God." In fact, Paul is calling his clear conscience to the witness stand as "exhibit A" and declaring that, before God, his conscience is clean.

By the way, can you say that today? My friend, there are few softer pillows to lay your head on at night than a clean conscience.

So Paul said, "Men, I have a clear conscience before God."

The high priest's conduct is in violation of the Law

Now, notice verses 2 and 3a.

The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! . . ."

Here is the great apostle saying, "God is going to smack you in the mouth, you whitewashed wall!"

Now we do not know what a whitewashed wall means, but it sure sounds good doesn't it?! I found myself saying, "All right, Paul, it's about time! Sic 'em!"

Finally, that old high priest was brought down a notch or two!

Now, Christians obviously should not use bad words, but there are times when you are mad with your boss or co-worker and you need something to say. Well, use this one, "You're nothin' but a whitewashed wall." You will get it off your chest, and you will be quoting scripture at the same time. It is perfect! Okay, I am not supposed to be enjoying this so much!

Frankly, Paul had had it. That punch in the mouth was the straw that broke the apostle's cool, and he let loose a string of inappropriate, disrespectful words that in just a moment, he will wish he had not said.

Paul is not finished, by the way. Notice the next phrase in verse 3b.

Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?

Paul is right. The high priest violated the law to administer punishment during a trial.

It was because of the "whitewashed wall" bit that the bystanders said in shock to Paul, in verse 4,

. . . Do you revile God's high priest?

Continue to verse 5.

And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people."

This, by the way, is one of the passages that some use to make the point that Paul had great difficulty with his eyesight. Perhaps this was his physical infirmity; his thorn in the flesh that he mentions in II Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 7.

For whatever reason, Paul admits his error and apologizes for his angry words against the highest spiritual office in the land.

Now Paul goes on in verses 6 through 10.

But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!"

As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.

For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledged them all.

And there occurred a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"

And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.

Stop at this point and let us pull some things together.

The failure of Paul

Paul had dreamed for many months of this moment before the Sanhedrin. His hopes were high that somehow he could penetrate their blindness with the light of the gospel.

The trial, however, had gotten out of hand almost immediately, and Paul knew the problem had been his uncontrolled anger. His failure fell on three different fronts.

Paul reacted in angry frustration

1. First, Paul reacted in angry frustration.

By the way, a “whited wall” was a reference to a decaying wall that had just been given a coat of white paint in order to cover up the rotten wood. The only other time the phrase is used is when Jesus described the religious leaders as whited sepulchers (grave stones). A month before Passover time the grave stones were painted white so that people might avoid them and not accidentally come in contact with them. If they did, they were rendered ceremonially unclean and were unable to participate in the Passover.

Christ was saying to the religionists of his day what we can still say today, “You look clean but you represent death, not life.”

Paul apologized with a minimal recantation

2. Secondly, Paul apologized with a minimal recantation.

Notice in verse 5, that Paul’s apology was directed, not at the high priest, but toward the office of high priest. He realized that he had been wrong, but he just could not bring himself to apologize to that scoundrel of a man who was known throughout Israel, according to Josephus, as a gluttonous, violent, cruel, and corrupt man.

Paul contradicted the example of Christ’s passion

3. Thirdly, Paul contradicted the example of Christ’s passion.

In John, chapter 18, Jesus Christ was standing trial, and the high priest allowed Jesus to be struck on the mouth. Jesus responded with this same thing that Paul did. He said, in verse 23,

. . . If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?

In other words, “You’ve just broken the law which you are supposedly upholding!”

However, Jesus Christ did not say the first part. As I Peter, chapter 2, verse 23a, tells us,

. . . while being reviled, He did not revile in return . . .

On this occasion, while Paul was experiencing the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings, he was not responding like Christ.

Who among us today would have? We have all known the truth of the words penned by an anonymous author, “Speak when you are angry, and you will deliver the best speech you will ever regret.”

Just imagine, for a moment, what Paul must have felt, as he sat under heavy guard in that Roman barracks.

One commentator drew a word picture as he imagined Paul at this moment. Paul with his back against the wall, is sitting with his legs drawn up and his head resting on his forearms. He is exhausted, but cannot sleep because of the guilt that whips him as hard as any scourging. He is thinking, “I had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to preach the gospel to the highest Jewish officials in the world, and I blew it. How stupid I was to lose my temper! I, ‘the great apostle’ – hardly. ‘The great failure’ is more like it.”

How encouraging this passage must have been to the thousands of Christians who would read it during the early centuries of the church – people who had ruined an opportunity because of their temper; who had lost their cool under pressure and fired off words they wish they could recapture.

People like us, in this day, have had times when we wish we had handled ourselves with greater tact and grace. We short circuited the gospel by our frustration and failure to keep our heads when everyone around us was losing theirs.

Another commentator pointed out that, instead of Paul bravely carrying the torch of Christ to his former peers, he had overpowered the gospel message with his own explosive anger. Having let down his Lord so badly, how could he go on?

At that moment the Lord came and stood by Paul and encouraged him, and us, to continue on. Notice verse 11a.

But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, “Take courage . . .”

“Take courage” could be translated, “take heart; don’t lose hope; don’t give up”.

Five times, our Lord said that to people. To:

- the paralyzed man, “Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven.” (Matthew 9:2b);
- the woman who had suffered for twelve years trying one cure after another, “Daughter, take

courage; your faith has made you well.”
(Matthew 9:22a);

- the terrified disciples in the storm who saw Him walking out to them on top of the water, “Take courage, . . . do not be afraid.” (Matthew 14:27b);
- His confused disciples on His last night with them before He was crucified, “take courage; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33b);
- Paul, in this makeshift cell room, His discouraged, defeated servant, “Take courage . . .” (Acts 23:11a).

It was when the darkness was most overwhelming in the lives of people that Jesus Christ uttered these words. This gives us every reason to believe that Paul was intending to give up. He was probably thinking, “I blew it in Jerusalem, so why in the world would God ever send me to Rome?!”

However, Jesus put a covering about His glory, slipped into that barracks, and walked over beside Paul and said, in verse 11, “Paul, don’t lose heart; don’t give up . . .”

. . . for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.

The faithfulness of God

You need to understand that this story is not about Paul’s faithfulness, but all about God’s faithfulness. And, the faithfulness of God was demonstrated in several ways.

God encouraged Paul’s spirit

1. First, God encouraged Paul’s spirit.

That occurred in the words we have just discussed, “Take courage!” or “Take heart!”

God affirmed Paul’s testimony

2. Secondly, God affirmed Paul’s testimony.

You might say, “Wait a second, I thought Paul blew it!”

He did. In fact, if you look carefully at Christ’s affirmation, the Lord mentions Paul’s testimony in Jerusalem. That would include his wonderful speech to the Jewish mob, as well as his earlier testimony to the Jerusalem church.

That was so gracious of the Lord. He reflected on what Paul had done well and commended him for it.

You do not see the Lord here saying, “Listen, Paul, about that explosion in front of the Sanhedrin . . . what in the world got into you?”

Why not? Because the Lord knew that Paul knew that he had been wrong and that he was so discouraged about it. I believe that Paul had already dealt with that before the Lord.

God announced Paul’s future

3. The third revelation of God’s faithfulness was that He announced Paul’s future.

In verse 11b, He says,

. . . you must witness at Rome also.

In other words, “Paul, you’re going to go to Rome too.”

The Conspiracy Is In Motion!

Now look at verses 12 and 13.

The Assassins seek to kill Paul

A conspiracy is in motion!

When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who formed this plot.

These forty men were zealots; their official name was “Assassin”. They were professional killers who rubbed out any pro-Roman Jew. Their name “Assassin” came from the word “sicarri,” which meant, “dagger”. They would hide a dagger under their cloaks and would often come alongside their target in a crowded market or road and stab them, and then quietly slip away.

By the way, just as the Sanhedrin and the Assassins collaborated to kill Paul, so another Assassin collaborated with the Sanhedrin to kill Jesus. That Assassin’s name was Judas Iscariot. Iscariot is a derivative of “sicarri”. He also was a man of the dagger; a member of the Assassins who had hoped Christ would overthrow Rome. But, when he realized Christ had a spiritual mission, not a political mission, he switched sides and betrayed the Lord.

In this verse, forty Assassins plan to kill Paul, and they vow not to eat or drink until he is dead. They are about to lose a lot of weight.

The Romans seek to protect Paul

Skip to verses 16 through 22.

But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul.

Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him."

So he took him and led him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you."

The commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, began to inquire of him privately, "What is it that you have to report to me?"

And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him.

"So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you."

So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, "Tell no one that you have notified me of these things."

The little things a sovereign God did

Let us look at the "little things" that a sovereign God did in this situation.

- Paul's nephew was at the right place at the right time and overheard the plot (verse 16a);
- Paul's nephew was able to slip away and reach Paul (verse 16b);
- a centurion was willing to be "commanded" by Paul (verse 17);

- the commander was willing to carefully listen to the nephew (verse 19);
- the nephew was able to slip away without anyone knowing (verse 22);
- the might of the Roman army surrounded Paul with protection (verses 23-25a),

And he called to him two of the centurions and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen." They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor. And he wrote a letter having this form: . . .

- the commander was moved to write a letter on Paul's behalf (verses 26b-29),

Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came upon them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment.

Wow! What would motivate this Roman commander to put his reputation on the line for an unknown Jew who had caused him nothing but trouble?

A sovereign God was at work. And our sovereign God can take the heart of a king and a commander alike and turn it whichever way He so desires.

Application – Three Timeless Truths

Let me give three timeless truths in application of this text.

The death of God's servants can only occur when God is ready

1. First, the death of God's servants can only occur when God, who is in control of all things, is ready.

Stephen preached one time, and a riot was stirred up that resulted in his death. Paul has been in three riots at this point, and has survived them all!

Why? Because God is sovereign, and His servant is not finished.

The failures of God's servants most often occur when they forget that God is sovereign

2. Secondly, the failures of God's servants most often occur when they forget that God is sovereign.

Now, it is one thing to believe, as all of us probably do, that life and death are under the control of God. Most would say, "Yea, I believe that God controls the big things, like life and death."

We are not too sure about the little things, the ordinary things, the events of life; like stoplights and plane delays and rainstorms. In other words, we most often lose control because we forget that God is in control of the smaller things.

The Israelites provide a good example of this:

- In Exodus, chapter 14, the Red Sea parted and they walked across on dry land. What a huge demonstration of God's power that was for them to experience!
- In Exodus, chapter 15, they sing praises to God who delivered them from the armies of Egypt.
- In Exodus, chapter 16, they reach the conclusion that they will starve to death.

In other words, God controls the big things. He swept apart the Red Sea, and they marched between two walls of water on dry ground. Wow!

Then, however, the Israelites are saying, in effect, "We know God can do the big stuff, but we're hungry. I wonder who can provide something to eat?"

The truth is, they, like us, often just forget what our sovereign God is capable of doing.

The faithfulness of God's sovereignty is not handicapped by whether or not we remember

3. Thirdly, the faithfulness of God's sovereignty is not handicapped by whether or not we remember.

God's providence is not dismantled by our panic. His will will be done; His mission will be accomplished.

God did not dust off His hands and say, "Well, Paul, you blew it; you forgot I was sovereign; you couldn't handle the pressure. I'll just have to find someone else a little more reliable under the steamroller of conflict and stress. After what you did in Jerusalem, there's no way I can trust you to go to Rome for Me now."

Certainly, Paul's, and our, response under pressure determines what kind of testimony we will have and what type of ministry God has for us.

The truth remains that if Paul had not lost his cool, who knows, perhaps he could have more clearly testified before the Sanhedrin about the truth of Jesus Christ. But that opportunity was forever past.

God, however, still had plans for Paul, and He still has plans for you and me.

I wonder if the words of that popular song came to Paul's mind. It had been sung for generations, penned earlier by the great hymn writer, King David.

Let me read the lyrics to hymn number 103, or as we call it, Psalm 103. Listen to a man who knew what it was like to lose his cool and his character and yet, experience the refreshing grace of God. Listen to verses 2 through 5, 8 through 14, and 17a.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits;

Who pardons all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases;

Who redeems your life from the pit, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;

Who satisfies your years with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle. . . .

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.

He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever.

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.

As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him [His children].

For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust. . . .

But the lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him . . .

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/30/1998 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 1998 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.