

MacGyver Christianity

Acts 22:24-23:11

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There was a TV show made in the late 80's and into the early 90's that made a lasting impression on many people over the years called *MacGyver*. In it, the main character, Angus "Mac" MacGyver inevitably found himself in all sorts of situations that were seemingly impossible to deal with. But what made MacGyver so good was his ability to use what he had available to him (and his trusty Swiss Army knife) to come up with a workable solution. The show made an indelible mark on our culture, such that the word "MacGyver" has become a verb—you MacGyver something when you come up with a solution with whatever you have available to you.

I think we see Paul trying to do some "MacGyvering" in our passage today. He had been put in a pretty dangerous and hopeless situation. He didn't have much power at his disposal and seemed to be a pawn in a much bigger game of chess. But to his credit, Paul used all the options available to him to serve the Lord faithfully and try to protect himself (with his priorities in that order). As we look at what Paul did in his hopeless situations, my hope is that we will find some confidence and direction for the times when we feel powerless or hopeless as well.

A Close Call

Last week we looked at Paul's address to the crowd who had just tried to kill him. He had been taken into custody by the Roman military commander, Claudius Lysias as a protective measure. Paul asked the commander if he could speak to the crowd. Since he wasn't sure what was going on in the first place, he permitted Paul to speak to the crowd. When he addressed them in their own language, they became very quiet and listened to Paul's testimony of how God had gotten his attention and set him on a different path.

But once Paul mentioned that God had called him to go to the Gentiles, the Jewish crowd began to lose control once more. They became riotous again and started demanding Paul be killed. That's where we pick up the story again today.

²⁴ The commander brought Paul inside and ordered him lashed with whips to make him confess his crime. He wanted to find out why the crowd had become so furious. ²⁵ When they tied Paul down to lash him, Paul said to the officer standing there, "Is it legal for you to whip a Roman citizen who hasn't even been tried?"

²⁶ When the officer heard this, he went to the commander and asked, "What are you doing? This man is a Roman citizen!" ²⁷ So the commander went over and asked Paul, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes, I certainly am," Paul replied. ²⁸ "I am, too," the commander muttered, "and it cost me plenty!" Paul answered, "But I am a citizen by birth!"

²⁹ The soldiers who were about to interrogate Paul quickly withdrew when they heard he was a Roman citizen, and the commander was frightened because he had ordered him bound and whipped. (Acts 22:24-29, NLT)

The Roman commander was at his wit's end. He was frustrated, trying to figure out what was causing all this unrest. He knew Jerusalem was a volatile place, and since he was tasked with keeping law and order, he needed to understand the dynamics of what was happening. But he couldn't make sense of it.

Initially, he thought Paul was a revolutionary who had returned to make trouble again. After talking briefly with him, he decided he'd misjudged the situation, which was why he allowed Paul to speak to the crowd. Most likely, Claudius Lysias had some knowledge of Aramaic, the language in which Paul addressed the crowd, but probably didn't speak it well enough to know everything Paul had said. All he knew was that after he had gotten the crowd calmed back down, they once again demanded that Paul be killed. From his perspective, this man clearly must have done something wrong, so he wanted to get to the bottom of it. And if he wouldn't tell them why the crowd was rioting, he was going to make him talk.

So, the commander ordered Paul bound and lashed with whips to get the truth out of him. We need to understand what this command was about though. In Paul's letters, he spoke of having been beaten several times. He had faced some severe beatings during his ministry and bore many scars from these floggings on his body.

The beating ordered by Claudius Lysias, however, was different. This flogging was more akin to the beating Jesus had endured. Each lash would shred the skin and dig deep into the flesh. Many did not survive, and those who did were left permanently disfigured. It often took months, if not a year or more for the wounds to heal.

I believe Paul would have been willing to endure such a beating if it had been necessary for him to carry the gospel message further. I am certain he wouldn't be excited to do so but would be willing. But Paul wasn't afraid in this situation. On the one hand, he knew that God was in control, so no matter what happened, it would be ok. But he also had a much more mundane ace up his sleeve. He had the Roman law on his side.

When they brought him in to be flogged, Paul asked a very pointed question: "Is it legal for you to whip a Roman citizen who hasn't even been tried?" Of course, Paul knew the answer to that question. It was not legal to whip or even shackle a Roman citizen who had not been found guilty by trial. Paul was entitled to what we would call due process. He had not been convicted of a crime, so the commander's order was, in fact, illegal.

The other soldiers knew this and quickly retreated to fetch the commander, to clarify the order. He asked if Paul was a Roman citizen, to which Paul replied he was. The commander said that he was too, but it had cost him a high price.

In our society, everyone born in our country is automatically granted citizenship. But that was not the case in Rome. Because it was an empire that encompassed many foreign lands and viewed conquered people as subjects, only few were afforded citizenship. There were a few instances where citizenship was made possible to purchase, and many instances where citizenship could be purchased by bribing the right people. But if your parents were Roman citizens, then you were as well. Paul said he was born a citizen, so his father must have been a Roman citizen. We don't know how that came about, but being born a citizen was seen as superior to having purchased citizenship.

Roman citizens had many rights, including the right to a trial before being punished and the right to appeal their case to be heard by Caesar himself. Roman citizens typically had some sort of identification that could prove their citizenship, because the penalty for falsely claiming citizenship was death. The soldiers suspected Paul was telling the truth, because the penalty for lying would have been worse than what he was already about to be subjected to. Once Paul's citizenship came to light, the commander immediately rescinded the order to have Paul beaten and regrouped once again.

This reminds us that we should not discount some of the more mundane tools at our disposal. It may not seem like a great spiritual victory for Paul to have been spared a beating because he claimed his rights as a citizen of Rome, but it was a shrewd move on his part. He used the resources God had given him with the intention of carrying the ministry further.

This raises the question for us: what resources has God given you that you can use for Him? Maybe you have some specific skills you can leverage to open doors for ministry. I realized years ago that photography could open such doors for me. Is that an overtly spiritual endeavor? No. But can it be used to create opportunities for ministry? Absolutely! You surely have similar skills or resources you can use to serve the Lord. Simple, worldly things can be used to further advance the Lord's work if we approach them with the right mindset. Paul understood this and used it to his advantage. His example challenges us to do the same.

At the Sanhedrin

Once again, Claudius Lysias was flummoxed, trying to figure out what to do with Paul. He had no evidence that Paul had done anything wrong other than that the people rioted when he spoke to them. He knew he couldn't beat the truth out of him, so he was forced to take a different approach. This time, he decided he'd let the Jews themselves figure out what the problem was, then he would know how to respond. So he ordered the Jewish Sanhedrin into session to examine Paul and render a verdict.

The Sanhedrin was a group of the elders of Israel, and was made up of 70 men, most of whom were respected teachers of the law. Paul likely would have known several of these men, as they had probably run in the same circles in their early years. This was the group tasked with investigating him. Luke records Paul's encounter with the group.

Gazing intently at the high council, Paul began: "Brothers, I have always lived before God with a clear conscience!" ² Instantly Ananias the high priest

commanded those close to Paul to slap him on the mouth. ³ But Paul said to him, “God will slap you, you corrupt hypocrite! What kind of judge are you to break the law yourself by ordering me struck like that?” ⁴ Those standing near Paul said to him, “Do you dare to insult God’s high priest?” ⁵ “I’m sorry, brothers. I didn’t realize he was the high priest,” Paul replied, “for the Scriptures say, ‘You must not speak evil of any of your rulers.’” (Acts 23:1-5, NLT)

Why did Paul gaze intently at the room? It’s possible that he was taking in the faces he had once known. Many believe Paul had an issue with his vision, so he was simply trying to see who people were. Or maybe he was just studying his audience as he contemplated the right way to approach them.

He began by saying that he had always lived with a clear conscience before God. We may ask how that could possibly be? Paul recognized himself as a terrible sinner who was completely unable to save himself. How could he say he had always lived with a clear conscience?

He could say this because before his encounter with Christ, he did indeed have a clear conscience. He believed himself to be righteous due to his rigorous adherence to the law. Paul described himself as “faultless” in terms of his adherence to the law before Christ. That was his impression, at least. His conscience may have been clear, but it was also mistaken. It was only after encountering Christ that he could truly have a clear conscience—not because of his own righteousness, but because he was confident in the forgiveness offered by Christ!

I suspect Paul planned to build exactly such a case for this group of Jews who thought as Paul once had. Again, he was probably trying to establish some common ground with them. But everything got derailed when the high priest, Ananias ordered that Paul be slapped for this statement. Paul snapped back that God would slap him for his hypocrisy. We assume that Paul made this statement because he was ordering Paul to be punished even though he had not been found guilty of a crime yet, and therefore this was a miscarriage of justice.

Someone rebuked him, telling him that he should not speak to the high priest in that way. Paul apologized, saying he didn’t realize Ananias was the high priest. This statement could have several explanations. First, Ananias was likely not wearing his priestly robes, so he looked the same as everyone else. He and Paul were likely not personally acquainted, so Paul simply didn’t recognize him. Second, if Paul had a vision issue, as many suspect he did, then he simply couldn’t tell he was the high priest. The third possibility is that Paul was making an ironic statement, essentially saying, “I didn’t think a man who acted like that would be a high priest—that’s why I didn’t recognize him.” In fairness, Ananias had a reputation of being brash and quick-tempered, but we can’t be certain exactly what Paul meant. I suspect he simply didn’t know.

Whatever the case was, Paul backed off and apologized, recognizing that he needed to be subject to the law of God as well.

More Chaos

After a rocky start, Paul began to address the group in earnest.

⁶ Paul realized that some members of the high council were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, so he shouted, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, as were my ancestors! And I am on trial because my hope is in the resurrection of the dead!”

⁷ This divided the council—the Pharisees against the Sadducees—⁸ for the Sadducees say there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, but the Pharisees believe in all of these. ⁹ So there was a great uproar. Some of the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees jumped up and began to argue forcefully. “We see nothing wrong with him,” they shouted. “Perhaps a spirit or an angel spoke to him.” ¹⁰ As the conflict grew more violent, the commander was afraid they would tear Paul apart. So he ordered his soldiers to go and rescue him by force and take him back to the fortress. (Acts 23:6-10, NLT)

Paul recognized the division inherent in this group. The Pharisees were the religious conservatives of the day. They rigorously held to the law and believed in the resurrection of the dead as well as angels and other spirits. The Sadducees only recognized the first five books of the Old Testament, and since there isn't much about resurrection or angels or demons there, they rejected all such notions. The Sadducees had also adopted a position of cooperation with Rome, which was at odds with everything the Pharisees believed.

Paul decided to lean into this division, identifying himself as a Pharisee and stating that he was on trial because of his belief in the resurrection of the dead. This ended the matter, as the council was no longer interested in examining Paul, they simply divided themselves along party lines and began to fight amongst themselves. Claudius Lysias quickly realized nothing good was going to come of this meeting, and once again feared for Paul's safety, so he took him back to the fortress.

Many have questioned why Paul chose to take this approach. Was he trying to provoke division? Or was he simply trying to gain some common ground with the Pharisees, hoping to open a door to them to share the gospel and maybe utilize their loyalties as a means to being set free? We don't know. The passage doesn't explain Paul's reasoning, just what he did. It does, however, tell us that Paul made note of the makeup of his audience, so his remarks were calculated. We can't know whether things went as he'd planned, but we know he ended up back in prison, the same place he had started.

Comfort

That night, I imagine Paul laying in his cell, replaying the events of the last couple of days. I wonder if he began to second-guess himself. I wonder if he began thinking of ways he could have responded differently, or if he began to question whether he should have come to Jerusalem at all. Regardless, the Lord appeared to Paul that night.

¹¹ That night the Lord appeared to Paul and said, “Be encouraged, Paul. Just as you have been a witness to me here in Jerusalem, you must preach the Good News in Rome as well.” (Acts 23:11, NLT)

The Lord knew his servant could use a pick-me-up, so He appeared to Paul and told him two things: **first, he had been a faithful witness in Jerusalem.** Paul may have dwelt on his mistakes and ways he could have approached things differently. But the Lord told him he had been faithful in proclaiming the gospel. God is not hindered by our imperfect efforts but asks us to do what we can—He will handle the rest. He reminded Paul that he had been faithful in doing what God had called him to do.

Second, he would be heading to Rome to do much the same. God didn't give Paul details. He didn't explain how he'd be getting to Rome, when he'd get there, or what it would look like, but He did let Paul know this was not the end of the story. He had more work for Paul to do. And Paul should continue to do what he had been doing.

Sometimes we all need that kind of encouragement. We can become so fixated on all our failures that we begin to get discouraged, maybe even questioning whether we should continue on the path we've taken. Remember, nothing done for the Lord is ever wasted! God asks us to faithfully serve Him and trust that He can use it for good.

Conclusion

As we wrap up today, I want to draw some concluding lessons we should take from this passage. **First, we must never become weary of doing good.** Just because we do good things, it doesn't guarantee there won't be bumps in the road. When we face hardships, it's easy to focus on the things we could have done better. And that's good, because it helps us from repeating the same mistakes. But if we fixate on our failures, we may become discouraged and stop serving the Lord entirely. Keep doing what you know is right. Even imperfect servants (which is all of us!) can be used by God.

Second, not every attempt to share the gospel will succeed. Paul, the great evangelist who desperately wanted to reach his people with the gospel was trying everything he could to share the message with the Jews in Jerusalem. Sometimes the time is not yet right for people to embrace the gospel message. Our job is to share the message the best we can, trusting that God can cause the seeds we scatter to sprout long after we've gone.

Third, we should be creative in how we minister. Not all ministry is preaching or serving in a church. In fact, most is something other than that! Ministry is simply using our unique gifts, resources and abilities to honor the Lord. Utilize everything at your disposal to point people to Jesus. When we do that, ministry becomes a lot of fun.

In many ways, we are all constantly tasked with being a bit like MacGyver. We know the task before us is far greater than we can tackle alone. Our job is simply to use the things before us to the best of our ability. Unlike MacGyver, however, we aren't on our own. The Lord promises that nothing we do for Him will ever be in vain. That should give us the encouragement we need to keep serving Him in whatever capacity we are able. He will give us opportunities; He simply asks us to be faithful witnesses. That's what He desired of Paul, and it's what He desires of us as well.

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