

Paul replied, 'Brothers, I did not realise that he was the high priest; for it is written: "Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people."' Acts 23.5.

The Roman commander simply could not understand what all the fuss was about. What had whipped up the Jewish mob to want to kill Paul? Best thing, he thought, would be to take him to the Jewish religious court, the Sanhedrin, Acts 22.30, p1120... Paul addressed the members of the Sanhedrin as fellow Jews, as 'Brothers', 23.1... But when he claimed to have acted within his *conscience*, the outraged high priest, Ananias, ordered that Paul be slapped on the mouth, the ultimate insult, v2... Then Paul, who was no limp-wristed wimp, replied with, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!' v3... (You may remember that Jesus also once called the hypocritical Pharisees 'whited sepulchres' and at his trial was slapped in the face by one of the high priest's officials).

But when the bystanders asked Paul at v4, 'Do you dare to insult the high priest?' Paul gave an amazing answer, v5... He didn't *know* he was the high priest, and had he known, he wouldn't have said what he said. Why? Because the Bible at *Ex* 22.28, says 'Don't speak evil about the ruler of your people.'

What an incredible answer! And what an extraordinary reason he gave for apologising to the high priest! We know from the Jewish historian, Josephus, that Ananias was a disgrace as the high priest. We also know that he was wrong to abuse his position to have a defendant slapped before the trial had even begun. It is true that two wrongs don't make a right, but what made Paul change his tune was *scripture*. However unworthy Ananias was, God himself had said at *Ex* 22.28, 'Do not speak

evil about the ruler of your people.' (With Paul being away for so long on his missionary journeys, it was possible that he did not know what the present high priest looked like, hence his reply at 23.5: 'I didn't realise that he was the high priest').

What I want you to notice is the utter seriousness with which Paul takes the Bible, the OT. Here Paul quoted scripture *against* himself, even when the high priest was abusing his position. He apologised to the high priest, not because he deserved it, but because God's Word *demand*ed it.

And that is the whole point. How do you see the Bible? Is it just an interesting historical record of the Jews? A useful collection of wisdom and poetry that you can dip into and out of when you like? Or is it the very Word of God? Is the Bible what God himself said, sometimes through fallible human beings, and sometimes directly written down by his own finger?

Earlier in *Acts*, at 21.28, Paul was accused of going *against* God's Word ... Our passage here at 23.5 shews that to be nonsense. Jesus *also* was accused of subverting God's Word, but turn to *Matt* 5.17-20 on p969 to see how he came only to *confirm* and *fulfil* God's Word... There's a clever but fallacious notion doing the rounds these days that though *Paul* condemned homosexuality, *Jesus* never even mentioned it. Since Jesus is greater than Paul, his views trump Paul, so we can ignore the old screwed-up Paul. No! Jesus said that 'not a jot or a tittle of the law will disappear until everything is accomplished', and that, I'm afraid, includes *Lev* 18.22!

Notice those words of Jesus, 'Nothing of the Law, of God's Word, the Torah, will disappear until everything is

*accomplished'*. When God speaks; when he reveals his will, it's going to happen. It isn't for us to ignore it. Forgive me again, will you turn to p742, *Isaiah 55.11* ... 'God's Word will not return to him empty, but will accomplish what he desires'. God's Word, what he says, is *powerful*, and not for us to take or leave. What he says is going to happen, is going to happen. 'The Word of our God shall stand for ever', says *Is 40.8*.

So when God promised Abraham that he would have as many children as there are stars in the sky, that's what he would have, even though at 75 he had no children! But that's what *did* happen. Abraham *did* have Isaac, the miracle child, and from him came all the Jews and the Arab people. God said that through Abraham *all* the peoples of the earth would be blessed. That happened too, for from Abraham came the nation of Israel, and from Israel came Jesus, the *true* Israelite, by whose saving work at Calvary, *all* the peoples of the earth will be blessed.

God wrote with his own *finger* the 10 Commandments. People have ignored them ever since and made a complete mess of their personal lives and of their societies. God's Word is not life-style choice which you can take or leave. Ignore God's way; ignore God's instruction manual, and you will mess up. Fact!

A lot of the Bible is God speaking to *warn* us. *If* you don't live his way; *if* you ignore him and worship false gods, he will judge you and punish you. The vast majority of the Jews in the OT, including the religious leaders, laughed at all this judgemental rubbish. Guess what? God did what he said he would do. God did the unthinkable. He sent the Babylonians to invade Israel, to destroy their beautiful Temple in Jerusalem, and to

take the Jews away into exile in Babylon. God did it to *them*, so why won't he do it to *us* with all our greed, sin and blasphemy? God does what it says on the tin. We've kidded ourselves that it doesn't matter whether we ignore God. Look at the Jews and Babylon and learn that God means what he says. We are under judgement here in Britain, and especially our church leaders for keeping quiet about what God has clearly said.

History shews that God does what he says. In his Word, God warned the arrogant that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Look at history: over-mighty Assyria was defeated. So was Babylon, and Greece, and Rome. They're just ruins now. Where is the British empire today? And we're continuing down the tubes. The lying politicians and celebs should look out. Soon we shall be just ruins, 'as Nineveh and Tyre'. This is all part of God's promised judgement on us.

And when he speaks to promise *comfort* to those who turn to him; forgiveness to those who repent, and guidance to those who seek him, he keeps that Word also. When he raised Jesus from the dead, he *proved* that he keeps his Word; that he is able.

The devil has very nearly deceived all our people that it doesn't matter what they do; that there's no final justice; that you don't need to bother with God. This is the Great Delusion. But everything God has ever said has either come to pass, or is coming to pass. That's why Paul took God's Word so seriously. God's Word says that we are under *judgement*. There is such a thing as hell, and we need to get right with God, and it needs to start in our churches and particularly with our clergy, for 'the Word of our God shall stand for ever'.