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Take a look with me at this short piece...

Among the apostles, the one absolutely stunning success was Judas, and the one thoroughly groveling failure was Peter. Judas was a success in the ways that most impress us: he was successful both financially and politically. He cleverly arranged to control the money of the apostolic band; he skillfully manipulated the political forces of the day to accomplish his goal.

And Peter was a failure in ways that we most dread: he was impotent in a crisis and socially inept. At the arrest of Jesus he collapsed, a hapless, blustering coward; in the most critical situations of his life with Jesus, the confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi and the vision on the Mount of Transfiguration, he said the most embarrassingly inappropriate things. He was not the companion we would want with us in time of danger, and he was not the kind of person we would feel comfortable with at a social occasion.

Time, of course, has reversed our judgments on the two men. Judas is now a byword for betrayal, and Peter is one of the most honored names in church and world. Judas is a villain; Peter is a saint. Yet the world continues to chase after the successes of Judas, financial wealth and political power, and to defend itself against the failures of Peter, impotence and ineptness.

Perhaps every one of us in this room have (like Peter) made errors in judgment and behavior in our service to Christ. Maybe we have felt like a gargantuan failure... because we shied away from an opportunity to share our faith... when we knew God wanted us to speak up. ... Or perhaps we did speak... but our effort seemed forced and unnatural... (it didn't flow smoothly)... and we muddled through in an incomprehensible manner. Maybe you were asked to teach a class or a devotion... and people looked bored... disinterested... or asked you

questions that you could not answer. Or you tried to offer spiritual counsel and advise... and the ones you tried to help turned their anger on you.

If I am not the only one here... who has (on occasion) felt the sense of complete ministry failure... then we are in the right passage of Scripture for our study today. We stand to gain tremendous encouragement from Acts... chapter 23. Perhaps we also stand to gain a better sense for how we decide what success is and what failure is... and whether or not we have judged ourselves properly.

Paul, bleeding and torn from a terrible beating by an angry mob of his Jewish kinsmen, had just escaped death... at the hands of Roman intervention. And then... having obtained permission to address the angry mob... instead of being whisked to immediate safety... Paul lovingly spoke the truth of the Gospel to them once more... hoping his countrymen would respond positively to it. ...But the sad result was a further outpouring of hate toward Paul, as they threw off their cloaks and tossed dust into the air, shouting...
"Rid the earth of him!" and "He's not fit to live!"

Now... at this point... let me bring in J Vernon McGee for what he has to say about our passage in Acts today...

From this point on we find Paul giving a defense of himself and his ministry. He will appear before several rulers. Because the Jews are plotting his death, he will be taken down to Caesarea. He will spend about two years there in prison before he finally appeals and is sent to Rome.

You recall we have mentioned that there has always been some controversy, some difference of opinion, as to whether or not Paul should have gone to Jerusalem. Was he in the will of God when he did this? I contend that he was entirely in the will of God. I think that as we move on we will find again and again that Paul is in the

will of God. It is true that he has been arrested, and it is true that he is having a rough time, but that does not mean that he is not in God's will.

As we go along we can see the hand of God in the life of this man. The same One who moved in the life of Paul wants to move in your life and in my life today. That is the glory and wonder of it all, friend. Right down here where you and I walk in a commonplace way, God is moving in our lives. In one way we are living a very humble existence and many of us today have a very simple, routine life. Yet God is concerned and interested in us. God wants to give us that leading and guiding that you and I need for today in the complexity that faces us in our contemporary culture. Believe me, we need that help today. There is no question that we need God on the scene.

The Roman commander took Paul away from this violent scene... but Paul was not out of danger. The confused Roman Tribune ordered that Paul be strung out and receive a Roman scourging. (Roman Scourgings always left its victims either dead... or at least maimed and crippled for the rest of their life.) Just as the vicious flagellum was raised and ready to strip the flesh off Paul's back... the Apostle raised the issue of his Roman citizenship.

It was illegal to scourge a Roman citizen. ... Anyone who was part of scourging a Roman citizen... by Roman law... was to be put to death. So they dropped the whip and feared for their own lives because of what they almost did.

Having discovered that Paul was a Roman citizen... the Roman captain now had two serious problems to solve. ...First... he needed to let the prisoner know what the official charges were against him... since that was Paul's right as a Roman citizen. ... Second... he also needed to have some official charges for his own records and to share with his superiors. He was sure that Paul had done something notorious...

otherwise why would so many people want to do away with him? ... Yet nobody seemed to know what Paul's crimes were. ... What a plight for a Roman official to be in!

The logical thing was to let Paul's own people try him... so the captain arranged for a special meeting of the Jewish council (Sanhedrin). This group was composed of seventy (or seventy-one) of the leading Jewish teachers... with the high priest presiding. ... It was their responsibility to interpret and apply the sacred Jewish Law to the affairs of the nation... and to try those who violated that Law. ...The Romans gave the council permission to impose capital punishment where the offense deserved it.

The Tribune shoved Paul before them. But based on all that we have seen Paul do since coming to Jerusalem... I'm convinced that he was **delighted** to be there. ... Over and over Paul sought a chance to explain the Gospel to his countrymen. ... Now he has the undivided attention with an audience of his nation's **most prestigious leaders**.

WHAT AN OPPORTUNITY like he never had since becoming a Christian some 30 years prior! If he could win the highest Jewish court... the whole nation of Jews would be won! ...And that was Paul's whole passion for coming to Jerusalem on this trip!

Of course... Peter had testified before this group on a prior occasion ... and John had also come before them. But they were rejected. ... Peter and John were "know-nothing fishermen!" from the insignificant region of Galilee." ... **O**f course the Sanhedrin would not listen to them!" ...And Christ... Who had also appeared before them at the time He was condemned to death - did not have any credentials they would respect either!

Paul... I am sure... felt that where the others could not gain a proper hearing by them— certainly he could. ... Because he **had** every credential this group of leaders respected.

Paul had the most highly regarded education any Jew of his day could possibly have. (His being a former disciple of the famed Gamaliel... was better than many of those who sat on this council.) ... No member of the Sanhedrin could possibly consider Paul as their inferior – as they did when they dismissed the Galileans- Peter, John, and Jesus...

Secondly, the members of this council used to be Paul's social peers. ...He used to run in the same social circles with them. ...They had spent countless hours doing what 1st Century Jewish scholars loved nothing more than doing - debating Old Testament Scriptures. ...Can you imagine some of the memories many would have in seeing Paul again...? Some... no doubt... were even Paul's former school chums.

Again - WHAT AN OPPORTUNITY for Paul! Paul must have been excited, feeling that he had a special inroad with them which none of the others had. Since his conversion, he hasn't seen these old friends.

Now let's look at today's DRAMTIC passage of Scripture ... and watch it unfold...

Acts 23:1

Paul began by gazing intently at them before he spoke. And the idea that is expressed here in the Greek is that it was for quite a while. This same word is used for the apostles gazing heavenward as Jesus ascended.

Paul may have been sorting through some of his old memories with them. Maybe he was trying to re-establish rapport. ... "*Hey, look ... It's me! Saul of Tarsus*". Perhaps there were even a few exchanged nods of recognition. Or maybe he was just setting the tone that he was not intimidated ... but really quite at home among them.

The greeting that Paul gave to them was out of line for one who stood trial before this court. Paul addressed them informally - "*My brothers!*" when a much more formal address would be expected. These pompous leaders of Israel did not take too kindly to any outsider making himself to be their equal. Especially someone brought to trial before them. (Addressing them a "*Brothers*" instead of their loftier titles - which they loved was done at great risk by Paul). ... But the manner by which Paul does address them... tells us that Paul must have been... indeed... familiar with these men and not at all intimidated.

After referring to them as "*Brothers*", Paul claims that he had done his work as a Pharisee and then as an Apostle in good conscience. The Greek word translated here as "*perfectly good conscience*" actually means "*joint knowledge*". He was saying that the fact that he had energetically **lived up** to all of the truth he received was something Paul and the Lord knew together. (And for Paul, because of his extensive education, that was a lot of truth. It was a bunch to live up to.)

Wow! How much of the truth ... which has been given to you ... would you be willing to say the Lord and you both know - you have energetically lived up to ...? Are you faithfully living up to all of the truth that you possess ...?

Acts 23:2

Having just started his address, the High Priest, Ananias, ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. As I have tried to understand why such an order was given ... what makes the most sense to me - is that it was probably his salutation – "Brethren" - that enraged the High Priest. He might have felt it presumed on his previous associations with them.

It was such a harsh and unexpected thing for Ananias to do. But not only that ... Jewish Law explicitly forbade any Jew from striking a fellow Jew. In two different places the Jewish Law reads: *"He who strikes the cheek of one Israelite, strikes, as it were, the glory of God"*. And elsewhere it reads: *"He that strikes a man, strikes the Holy One"*.

Ananias was a Roman vassal, known for his greed and for stealing the tithes belonging to the poorer priests. The Zealot revolutionaries killed him in a.d. 66, about eight years after this hearing.

Paul, too, the victim of such harsh abuse as this, had his own impulsive response . . .

Acts 23:3

The Jews painted their tombs white as a warning ... because to touch a tomb brought defilement. Paul was saying that Ananias looked okay on the outside . . . but was actually full of rotting filth. This was an angry brash retaliation.

Paul had momentarily lost his control. His bitter reply was far different from his Lord's:

1 Peter 2:23 (ESV)

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

Paul's biting words brought an immediate response . . .

Acts 23:4-5

Who knows why Paul did not recognize Ananias. Some have speculated that since this meeting was put together in great haste by the Roman Tribune... that Ananias was not wearing his High Priestly garments to so distinguish him. Others point out that Paul had bad eyesight as a "thorn in the flesh". Many 1st Century (non-Biblical) writings attest to the fact that Paul had poor vision. Still others contend that Paul was probably still injured from his recent beatings by the angry mob - his eyes probably swelled over impairing his vision. It could also be (as simple as) that Paul was not looking in the direction of the High Priest when he said it. He did not know where the command came from. If he didn't see who said it... as far as Paul is concerned... it could have been any one of them in the room.

In any case... realizing his error, Paul immediately recanted.

What a credit to his character! Although human ... and shown to make mistakes like each of us... he was quick to confess his wrong.

I don't think we should try to defend Paul's bitter retort to Ananias any more than Paul himself did. ... Instead ... we ought to be challenged by Paul's immediate confession and humility

LISTEN – It is not your mistakes that will do you in... It will be the pride that keeps you from admitting them!

Paul had stepped outside the boundaries of Christ-centered attitude control.

Exodus 22:28

"Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people.

Ananias had broken the Law by having Paul struck across the mouth without an official charge of blasphemy. The Apostle had broken another Law by showing disrespect for the High Priest. They were **both** wrong. But Jesus... Who lived inside of Paul. . . made **him** willing to admit his mistake.

The sure sign of pride is that we defend our mistakes with our protests. We shout, *"Yes, but he is more wrong than I am!"* ...Or we might say, *"Who can blame me, after what he did to me?"*

FOLKS — Try to remember the tremendous wrong that was done against Paul . . . and the next time you are wronged... just like Paul. . . Let go of your pride. Stop justifying your own sin... by saying *"Their sin is greater...!"* ... allowing pride to control you.

Acts 23:6-10

Paul's ploy accomplished his immediate objective ... in that the Sanhedrin's wrath against Paul was directed away. But it also accomplished something I don't think Paul wanted.

It removed him from giving further witness to his former peers. Later on... as revealed in the next chapter in Acts ... when Paul stood before Felix ... he hinted that his action before the Sanhedrin here, was indeed, something that he regretted.

Acts 24:20-21 (ESV)

Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: 'It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.'"

This must have been one of the darkest nights of Paul's Christian life. For years his heart yearned for his fellow Israelites. He wrote in Romans, before coming here to Jerusalem, that he would gladly trade his own salvation in ... if it meant it would save his nation. ... That is how impassioned Paul was for them. ... But when he arrived in Jerusalem ... knowing that it would be tough and that hardship awaited him... he had hoped to have such a fruitful ministry there.

What he found... was a compromising church full of legalistic Christians and leaders who commanded him to do a hypocritical and sacrificial act. The Church at Jerusalem held him suspect because of his contact with Gentiles. ... And now - his one chance in being reunited with his former peers (the leadership of his people who he expected he had a good chance to reach with the Gospel) – had just

gone up in smoke! Paul's dreams of winning his nation for Christ – lay in ashes at his feet.

“Game Over... Paul! You blew it! You’re done! What a failure...!

How utterly devastated Paul must have been! Perhaps this as an all-time low for the Apostle. His heart ached. He was physically beat-up ... emotionally beat-up . . . and now, you can bet . . . feeling Spiritually beat-up. Paul was in the depths . . . alone . . . dejected . . . despirited.

We all sometimes want to curl up with the biggest blanket we can get . . . thumb in mouth . . . and forget the world. What would Christ do for Paul as he lay in such a valley . . . ?

Acts 23:11

The Lord is the initiator of the courage we need. His interventions provide you and I with stability for the strains of life. We come to Him because He first came to us. He knows our hurts and our hopes.

The Lord's personal appearance to the Apostle here should be an encouragement to us in our times of difficulty and pressure. Verse 11 says that "*the Lord stood at his side*". If that is all He did for the Apostle, it would have been enough. To know that the Lord is with us is a tremendous source of encouragement. He promises us in Hebrews 13:5 that He will never leave or forsake us. And he always makes the first move toward us.

The Lord did not rebuke Paul for going to Jerusalem. Rather, He commended him for the witness he had given, even though that witness had not been received. When you read the account of Paul's days in

Jerusalem, you get the impression that everything Paul did failed miserably. His attempt to win over the legalistic Jews only helped cause a riot in the temple, and his witness before the Sanhedrin left the council in confusion. But the Lord was pleased with Paul's testimony, and that's what really counts.

Paul would go to Rome! he would have a chance to speak to the World's leaders in Rome. This had been Paul's desire for months (Acts 19:21; Rom. 15:22-29), but events in Jerusalem had made it look as though that desire would not be fulfilled. What encouragement this promise gave to Paul in the weeks that followed, difficult weeks when leaders lied about him, when fanatics tried to kill him, and when government officials ignored him. In all of this, the Lord was with him and fulfilling His perfect plan to get His faithful servant to Rome.

When he needed reconfirmation the most ... the Lord allowed Paul a glimpse of His strategy for him.

It is the same presence and a love... that will support us in the fulfilling of our calling. ... For ourselves the details will no doubt be different in a whole range of ways... and yet we will be no less supported. In this sense Paul is not exceptional. Jesus stands near us also, even as we read these words. 'Fear not, I am with you... always. Take courage! Your future is in my hands.'

Acts 23:12-35

The Lord not only gave Paul reaffirmation of His presence and guidance ... He intervened in a very dramatic way to insure nothing got in the way

of the plans He announced to Paul. This plot by the Jews reveals the depth of hatred that they had toward Paul. But the Lord had a much more ingenious plot!

Beneath the surface of our human analysis of our problems and pressures ... the Lord is arranging things to press forward to accomplish His will. . . .Whenever we get involved in the adventure of doing the Lord's will ... often we are amazed by the people God raises up to help us. They step in at just the right moment. We are amazed, and then maybe a little ashamed for doubting that the Lord would eventually come through.

I love how this episode ends! Lysias... not to be outwitted by the Jews... understanding how vicious and intent they were... probably felt that these puny Jews were threatening his very command and Roman procedures for protecting one of its citizens. So with dramatic flare, he assembled 470 mighty Roman soldiers to protect Paul - a single prisoner.

Surely Paul had to chuckle inside as he rode from Jerusalem to Caesarea. He left town more like a **king** than a criminal! Meanwhile his would-be assassins were left in town fighting insistent hunger pains! - I love it!

Christ told Paul to "Take courage" . . . and he did. May we do the same, telling Christ, "*Lord, I believe You with all my heart*".

On August 31, 2002, Phil Brabbs, a placekicker with the University of Michigan, lined up for the most important field goal attempt in his career. With five seconds left on the clock and his team trailing the Washington Huskies 29-28, Brabbs entered the game to try a 44-yard field goal. About 100,000 Michigan fans had stayed to watch.

Up to this point in the game, Brabbs wasn't having a good day. His first field goal attempt sailed wide left. In the second quarter he missed again. At halftime Brabbs was booed by the sellout crowd as he jogged to the locker room. Before the third quarter he missed every one of his warm-ups, all to the left. As a result, coaches benched Brabbs.

But after the backup kicker also missed a crucial field goal, Brabbs had another chance for redemption. As the time expired on the clock, his 44-yard kick flew between the uprights, giving Michigan a 31-29 win. A hundred teammates mobbed Brabbs while the fans cheered him. "I could have died right there," Brabbs said, "and I'd have died happy. I was like a presidential candidate." Even to this day, his game-winning field goal is simply called "The Kick."

But soon after "The Kick," a major injury sidelined Brabbs. He quit the team, graduated with a degree in engineering, landed a job with an IT company, married his college sweetheart, and had three children. But ten years later, in the summer of 2012, Brabbs, a committed Christian, was asked to deliver the commencement address at Frankenmuth High. He knew everyone was expecting him to mention "The Kick," but instead Brabbs looked at the students and said, "*Be a failure. It's the misses that propel you forward [in life.]*"

In a personal blog post, Brabbs expanded on that message:

Ten years later.... I am now thankful for the misses, because to this day, they are helping guide me through some of life's toughest challenges ... So let's raise our glasses to the many misses we have in life, whether missed field goals, snaps that got away from you, or an occasional botched hold. Those dark moments may just be the predecessor of a really great moment.

Have you ever experienced spiritual failure...? It may not actually be that. God may intend to use it – even still. But you are going to first have to take courage... fix your eyes on Christ... and join Him in what He is doing.