

## **ACTS 23 – Paul’s Second Defense: To the Sanhedrin**

When we left off last time in our study, the Roman commander, who in the Bible is called “the tribune” – he is the official who had rescued Paul from the angry mob – as we left off, he was quite perplexed. Things just did not make sense to him. In his custody is this man, Paul of Tarsus. He is a Roman citizen. He is from a Jewish background, well-educated and cultured. And he seems like a decent enough guy. What he cannot figure out is why do the Jews in Jerusalem want to kill him? What has Paul said or done to get the people so worked up? So, the commander is determined to find out the answer to this. He brings Paul before the Sanhedrin (the “council”) to try and sort things out. That is where we left off.

As Chapter 23 opens, Paul is standing before the calm atmosphere of a Jewish court. As you are about to see, it will not remain calm for very long.

READ Acts 23:1

Paul claims that everything he has done in his life, including that period when he persecuted the church, had been done with a clear conscience. Obviously, looking back at it in hindsight, persecuting the church had NOT been God’s will. Paul had done it back then with great zeal, but it was misguided zeal. This shows us that the statement “let your conscience be your guide” is not always a good idea. When guided by the conviction of the Holy Spirit and by the principles of God’s Word, our conscience functions well. But otherwise, a person’s conscience can lead individuals to do strange and even terrible evil things. Look back at church history... religious people, leaders of the church, killed many great saints of God that we revere today. And they did it with a clear conscience. They truly believed they were purging the world of heretics. Paul looks these pious Jews in the eye and basically says, “I have not done anything wrong!”

Well, that gets an immediate response from the Jewish people assembled there because they think otherwise.

### READ Acts 23:2-3

Paul is seen by the Jews as abandoning the Jewish faith and, therefore, in their minds, he is abandoning God. He is turning his back on God. So, for him to say, "I have not done anything wrong" is something that they see as borderline blasphemy! So, they hit him.

Well, Paul becomes angry (go figure) at the bullying tactics of the Jewish assembly here. They just hit him without cause, at least in his mind. He has done nothing wrong and then suddenly, boom! He accuses the one who had ordered him to be struck of being a "white-washed wall." In other words, pretending to be clean and pure on the outside, but inside in reality they are rotten. This is strong language. It is very similar to what Jesus said – "you are like whitewashed sepulchres" (Matthew 23:27). Paul then, after he says this, speaks God's judgment against him and things become heated at that point.

### READ Acts 23:4-5

Paul quotes from Exodus here. The people that are standing near Paul say, "You cannot talk to the high priest like that! Who do you think you are?"

Bible scholars have debated Paul's response here in Acts Chapter 23. The question is: Was Paul's response to the high priest appropriate or not? There are two basic schools of thought on this.

- (1) Paul knows that he is addressing the high priest and responds sarcastically and shows a total lack of respect. But that does not sound like the Paul we know so far. It just is not like Paul at all.
- (2) Paul genuinely did not know that it was the high priest who had ordered him to be struck. Once he is informed of who it was then he backs off, admits he is wrong and submits to the high priest's authority.

I support the second explanation for several reasons:

- (1) First (based on the later writings of Paul), Paul suffered from poor eyesight.
- (2) Second, Paul most likely did not know who the high priest was at this time. He has been gone on these missionary journeys. He has not been back in Jerusalem for a while. So, he probably does not know who the high priest is or is familiar with his voice.
- (3) Third, this assembly had been called together at the last minute by the Roman commander (he asked them to assemble), so it is possible that the high priest did not have his official robe on.
- (4) Fourth, we know from Paul's writings (such as Romans 13:1-7 and Titus 3:1) that Paul taught submission to human authority. So, it does not sound like Paul at all to be this blatantly derisive of someone in authority like the high priest.

So, Paul steps back and examines the situation. Here is what he is probably thinking as he stands before this assembly: He had been attacked and beaten by a mob of Jews there in the temple. He had been threatened with scourging by the Romans. And now he has just been struck by order of the high priest. So then, Paul realizes that he is not going to get a fair shake here. The cards are stacked against him. If he tries to make a defense, he will more than likely be shouted down or there will be a huge uproar. It is not going to go well. Instead, Paul turns to a new strategy, that is, to divide the Sanhedrin. Paul is one of them. He knows these people. He knows how they think. He knows the two main groups, the Pharisees and Sadducees, and he knows their differences. He knows exactly what issue to bring up.

READ Acts 23:6-8

The issue that Paul uses to divide them is this issue of the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees believe in the resurrection of the dead and they see it as the great hope of Israel. The Sadducees, on the other hand, deny the whole idea of the resurrection. These two groups disagree totally theologically.

READ Acts 23:9

As a result of Paul's statement, "the hope and resurrection of the dead that I am on trial," and saying, "I am a Pharisee," these Pharisees side with Paul. They are basically declaring his innocence here and demand that he be acquitted. But the Sadducees, they see things differently...

READ Acts 23:10

So, there is this uproar. They are pulling and tugging on Paul. The Roman commander at this point can forget any idea he had about getting to the bottom of the matter concerning Paul. He had hoped to get some answers about what it is about Paul that they hated so much. Well, he is not going to get any answers on this day. Not with this bunch acting the way they are. Once again, he commands the soldiers to rescue Paul and return him to the safety of the fortress.

READ Acts 23:11

"The Lord" here is speaking of Jesus. That evening Paul is lying in his cell inside the fortress and Jesus appears to him. I want you to put yourself in Paul's place. He is depressed, fearful and discouraged about all these things that have happened to him. He does not know what is going on, what the future holds. He may even feel like somewhat of a failure. In the midst of all that is weighing heavy on Paul's heart and mind, the Lord Jesus appears to him.

Now this is the fourth time in the book of Acts that the Lord Jesus appeared to Saul/Paul. Do you remember the other three times?

1. On the Damascus Road when he was converted (Acts 9:3-7).
2. In Corinth on his second missionary journey when he received confirmation from Jesus in a vision. That is when Jesus assured Paul that he would not be persecuted during his ministry there (Acts 18:9-11).

3. On his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion when he was in the temple. There he received his commission to be Jesus's minister to the Gentiles (mentioned in Acts 22:17-21).

In all three cases that Jesus appears to Paul, He gives him some kind of a message. The same thing happens here now for a fourth time. Paul is in the Antonian Fortress. He is feeling a little down and Jesus says, "You are going to testify also in Rome." Remember Paul had expressed earlier in Acts his desire to go to Jerusalem and Rome. He made that clear back in Acts 19:21. Now what Jesus is saying is, "Take courage. You have in fact testified about Me here in Jerusalem. You are going to testify in Rome also." That is what Paul needed to hear.

Well, no sooner does the Lord give Paul a promise that he is going to make it to Rome eventually, then a plot to kill him is devised. The schemes of the wicked are diametrically opposed to God's will. Here is God's will for him to go to Rome and now this plot is hatched, which is against God's will! So, God is going to have to intervene, right?

READ Acts 23:12

This is an extreme oath. They want this done very quickly. They do not want to wait. They are not going to eat or drink anything until they kill Paul. That means – do it now!

READ Acts 23:13-14

These 40-plus conspirators tell the Jewish religious leaders what their plan is.

READ Acts 23:15

They need the help of the Jewish religious leaders and the council. They need a good reason to have Paul taken out of the safety of the Antonian Fortress. So, the Jewish conspirators ask the Jewish religious leaders to petition the Roman commander to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his

case. They need their help. And then on the way from the fortress to wherever they are meeting, they will ambush the Roman soldiers. Remember there are 40 conspirators against a handful of soldiers. So, they are going to ambush them and kill Paul. That is the plan.

Let me ask you a question. Do these Jewish leaders here know the Ten Commandments? Do they know the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not kill"? Do you think they have heard about that? YES. They have some knowledge of the scriptures that killing is wrong. So, they know better. By the way, not only do they know "Thou shalt not kill," but there are a whole lot of these people on the council that know Paul is innocent. They even said so themselves. Remember when he was meeting with them and there was that big dissension. You have these two things going on so you would think that they would say, "No, that is wrong. We cannot do something like that." You would think that would be their reaction if they were reasonable people. But do they do that? It is not specifically stated here, but the implication is here that they go along with the plan.

READ Acts 23:16

Paul's own nephew overhears the scheme (though we are not told how). Is this just coincidence? No. I do not believe that it is. As soon as he hears of the plot, he rushes to the barracks to tell Paul.

There is not a whole lot said in scripture about Paul's family. Very little. This is one of the few places we hear about a family member. John Phillips in his commentary on Acts points out that in Paul's greetings in the book of Romans (at the end) he mentions "Andronica and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me" (Romans 16:7). He also mentions "Herodian my kinsman" (Romans 16:11). John Phillips believes that these kinsmen that Paul talks about in Romans were possibly Paul's sisters or cousins. So, we do not know a whole lot about Paul's family, but we do know that apparently some of Paul's family were Christians. This sister of his may have been a believer and her son a believer also. This is not coincidence.

This is divine intervention. Somebody that Paul knows hears the plot and goes to tell him.

READ Acts 23:17-18

As a Roman citizen, Paul is allowed to receive visitors. So, this boy is allowed to come see Paul. Paul obviously has some influence with the Roman commander and so, he is able to get his nephew an audience with the commander.

READ Acts 23:19-20

Paul's nephew makes the commander aware of the Jewish plot.

READ Acts 23:21-22

This is God's intervention working through the nephew. The commander listens attentively. He is probably surprised that the Jewish council would stoop so low as to do something like this. Do you think that the commander takes this report seriously? Yes, he does. Absolutely!

READ Acts 23:23-24

The commander arranges to get Paul safely out of Jerusalem. The last thing the commander wants is to have to explain to his superiors how a Roman citizen in his charge had been killed. The timing is perfect. At 9 PM the city gates close. The gates will not reopen until the next morning. So then, the whole group heads to Caesarea (on the Mediterranean coast some 60 miles from Jerusalem). Why Caesarea? Because it is the headquarters of Felix the governor, the Roman procurator of Judea. So, what God is doing here is He is working out His will to protect Paul through the Roman authorities.

Can you imagine the reaction of the Jews the next morning when they realize that their plan has been foiled? Based on their oath taken, they are going to starve to death! Personally, I do not think they kept their oath.

The Roman commander sends Paul down to Caesarea with this massive army of soldiers and he writes a letter to Antonius Felix, the

Roman procurator, the governor of Judea. He informs him of the recent events in Jerusalem involving his prisoner, Paul. The contents of this letter are mentioned by Luke in the next few verses. For the first time we learn the name of the Roman commander – his name is Claudius Lysias.

READ Acts 23:25-27

What he is saying is true, but he leaves out conveniently are the details about how he learned Paul was a Roman citizen. Remember, he was going to have Paul scourged. He leaves that part out.

He continues...

READ Acts 23:28-30

So, the Roman commander portrays himself in the best light he possibly can. He makes himself out to be some sort of a hero for justice. He basically tells Felix that, as he sees it, Paul's case involves nothing pertaining to Roman law. It is merely a Jewish religious squabble. That is how he sees it. He tells Felix that he has instructed Paul's Jewish accusers to bring their charges to him down in Caesarea. This is actually wise because often a change of venue is necessary to diffuse a volatile situation.

READ Acts 23:31-33

Here we are provided a few details of Paul's undercover journey from Jerusalem to Caesarea. What happens is the soldiers escort Paul in the night as far as this little town called Antipatris, about 40 miles from Jerusalem. Then they head back to Jerusalem while Paul rides the rest of the way with the horsemen to Caesarea. When they get down there, they present Paul and the letter for the governor.

READ Acts 23:34-35

"Praetorium" is another word for palace. It is important for Felix to know which Roman province Paul is from to be sure that he has the proper jurisdiction to hear Paul's case. When Paul claims to be from Cilicia, Felix knows that he can legally hear Paul's case (he is the deputy of the legate



of Syria and Cilicia). Until the court can properly convene and prosecutors can present their case, he has Paul remanded to custody in the guardroom, which is attached to the palace. These are pretty nice accommodations compared to what he has been in before. He is allowed to freely walk around and communicate with his friends. But he is still a prisoner of Rome and confined to an isolated area. Little does Paul realize that he will remain a prisoner in Caesarea for two years.

*[Showed class a photo taken on our trip to Israel of the ruins of the governor's palace at Caesarea Maritima, where Paul was held prisoner. It is a very beautiful setting right on the Mediterranean coast.]*

I wanted to show a picture of where Paul will be for the next two years. It is not the worst setting in the world, but he is still a prisoner.

So, what can we learn from Acts 23? What are some applications for us?

- Even the best of us will become angry at times. We must control our anger. Walk away and ask the Lord to calm our troubled spirit. "Cease from anger and abandon wrath; Do not get upset; it leads only to evil doing" (Psalm 37:8).
- God is always at work in our lives. Most of the time, however, we do not see what He is doing nor does it appear to be miraculous. Often, we may dismiss it as mere coincidence. Case in point: God providentially arranged the time, place, and the volume of the voices of those plotting to kill Paul and providentially arranged Paul's nephew to be there to hear it.
- In some ways Paul felt like he had been a failure in Jerusalem. But Jesus pointed out that he was not. Paul's responsibility was to bring the Word of God and to testify of Jesus, which he had done. The results are God's responsibility. Share the good news with others. Plant a seed. Let the Holy Spirit do His work.
- God's promises to us do not always happen overnight. Sometimes they take years, so we must live with a patient

expectation. God told Saul in Acts 9:15 (right after his conversion) that he would be His chosen instrument to carry the name of Jesus before kings. But that did not get fulfilled until the last part of the book of Acts, some 20 years later.