

# Acts 23

---

## *Lesson 6 Series 2*

With this chapter the trials of Paul in Jerusalem continue. This chapter can be broken down into two sections: 1. Paul's hearing before the Sanhedrin. 2. With the balance of the chapter dealing with the plot to assassinate Paul, the Roman response to foil that plot, culminating in Paul being transferred to Caesarea to appear before the Roman Governor Felix.<sup>1</sup>

The tribune takes Paul before the Jewish Sanhedrin, the great council of the Jews as this chapter opens. He has been escorted from his place of Roman imprisonment, likely the Fortress Antonia, to the location where the Sanhedrin met. There is uncertainty as to exactly where this meeting would have taken place. Paul is looking intently at this group as he addresses them as “brothers” (ἀδελφοί). Despite all the hardship and persecution that Paul has endured at the hands of the Jews up to this point, it is plain that he still

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2007), p. 423.

considers them his brothers and addresses them as such. A greeting that indicates he holds this relationship in greater esteem than the council members do as they will agree, in a very short time, to participate in a plot to assassinate Paul. There is perhaps a tremendous lesson for us today in this when it is so easy to speak of others in a disparaging manner. Paul tries to be respectful, at least at this point.

Paul begins by telling them that up to this very day he has lived his life with a clear conscience (*συνείδησις*) before God. The statement of Paul here does not conflict in any manner with what he says elsewhere (except perhaps at 1 Timothy 1:13-15, that indicates that previously he had done regrettable things in ignorance) that his behavior on either side of his conversion was ever motivated by anything other than “zeal for God”.<sup>2</sup> It is at this point that Ananias, who is identified by Luke as the “High Priest”, orders those that are standing near to Paul to “strike” or “hit” Paul on the mouth. There appears to be no motive whatever for this action on the part of the High Priest. Luke may have intended for his

---

<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 5 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 396.

audience to see how arbitrary and injudicious the Jewish supreme council has become, and especially their leader the High Priest.

At this point Paul responds to this act by indicating that it is clearly a petty and unlawful act and prophesying that God will strike him for such an action. To be certain, Paul understands his position before God, he is a spokesman for God. It is likely that at least some among Luke's readers would know their history and remember that Ananias was killed by Jewish zealots in A.D. 66 when Israel rebelled against Rome (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Book II: 441-442). Paul uses very vivid metaphor, perhaps taken from Ezekiel 13:10-15 where the image of a whitewashed wall is used to refer to false prophets. Paul is making the assertion that the high priest is one whose inner character is corrupt and false with only an outer veneer of holiness.<sup>3</sup>

Paul also accuses him of being in violation of that law even while he sits in the place of judgment over Paul. The connotation is clear, here is someone who is in the position

---

<sup>3</sup> J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 424.

of enforcing adherence to the law who violates it with impunity. Paul does not give a citation for any specific law that is being violated and Luke does not elaborate further. It may be the case that Paul is referring here to Leviticus 19:15 which states that it is improper to render unjust judgment or show partiality. In framing his response in the way that he does, Paul demonstrates that he is indeed an insider.<sup>4</sup>

Those standing nearby come to the defense of the High Priest accusing Paul of breaking the law by speaking out against the “leader of your people” (verse 4). There is an interesting irony here. They are claiming this law-breaking hypocrite as their leader and trying to include him as Paul’s leader too. Some have tried to indicate that Paul was truly ignorant of who Ananias is in this instance, and this is certainly a possibility. This seems highly improbable though, considering Paul’s nature, background, and the fact that he has just delivered, what many consider to be a prophecy, concerning the death of Ananias. Paul cites a

---

<sup>4</sup> J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 424.

passage from probably, the Septuagint, Exodus 22:27 (English Bible Exodus 22:28) that demonstrates once again his clear knowledge of scripture.<sup>5</sup>

Pervo indicates that Paul's response, that he did not "realize" (οἶδα) that Ananias was high priest, is too "disingenuous" for comfort. Ananias was presiding, and it must be presumed that he had some form of appropriate insignia of office. Additionally, on the previous day (22:5) Paul had appealed to this man as a suitable witness for his role as one who persecuted the Way. Paul's conscience appears to be clear as he quotes the passage but offers no apology. Whatever the situation, the result is that Paul now has the floor and the attention of those there and he takes this opportunity to start a conflict between the Pharisees and the Sadducees (verse 6).<sup>6</sup>

Paul divides his enemies, once again demonstrating that he is very much an insider among the characters in this group and identifies himself with the Pharisees and their hope of resurrection from the dead. Paul also here indicates

---

<sup>5</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 397.

<sup>6</sup> Richard I. Pervo, *Acts*, in the Hermeneia series (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 573.

that he is a “son of Pharisees” which likely means that his ancestors were Pharisees. Since the preponderance of evidence indicates that Pharisaic schools existed only in Palestine this would seem to imply that Paul’s ancestors became Pharisees before they migrated to Tarsus, where Paul was born (22:3). Paul was later sent back to Jerusalem to receive his education, or perhaps his family moved back to Jerusalem (22:3). Nothing can be certain in this regard, but the fact remains, Paul is a Pharisee.<sup>7</sup>

Paul makes it plain that he is on trial today because of his “hope of the resurrection of the dead”. Very little is said in the Old Testament with regard to the “resurrection”; this concept does not appear except in rare instances in texts that are obscure with regard to their precise meaning and late in general. Daniel 12:2 is one of those passages, and its date is very much disputed with many putting it in the second century B.C. rather than as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. It is the clearest Old Testament passage regarding the resurrection of the dead. This is striking, and

---

<sup>7</sup> J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 425.

it should be noted that in the Old Testament Israel is “attached to life – to this life – and, for the most part, in no way dreams of a marvelous life hereafter. Israel considers the world in which they have been placed to be the handiwork of God and human existence is a divine gift. The Israelite dreamt of having his days prolonged in the manner of the patriarchs (Genesis 15:15; 35:29) and not of eternal life.<sup>8</sup>

The usual view expressed, in the biblical books is that, at the point of death, “one’s shade descends to Sheol, where one remains forever, cut off from God’s presence. There are however, other elements within Judaism that are in conflict with this view such as God being the creator of life, the covenantal relationship with God who affects and nourishes such a relationship. Another issue that is a problem for this viewpoint is that any premature death seems to frustrate

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert Martin-Achard, Trans. Terrence Prendergast, “Resurrection (OT)”, in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 680-684.

justice.<sup>9</sup> All of this, and more, led to differing views within Judaism between the various groups.

As could be expected Paul's statement regarding hope of the resurrection created a furious debate and divided the council. In verse 9, at least the Pharisees in the group appear to find Paul vindicated with even the possibility that he may have received information from a spirit or angel being postulated. Needless to say, this does not help the situation as the Sadducees do not appear to accept the existence of angels or spirits either, though this is a point of dispute. Some believe that the Sadducees did indeed accept that angels and spirits existed but that what Luke is alluding to here is their contention that humans were not resurrected to become either of these things.<sup>10</sup> At this point, the dissention becomes violent, so much so that the tribune fears they are going to literally tear Paul into pieces. They then remove him to the barracks in order to protect his safety.

---

<sup>9</sup> George W. E. Nicklesburg, "Resurrection (Early Judaism and Christianity)", in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 684-691.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Yale Bible series, vol. 31 (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 719.



That very night (verse 11) the resurrected Lord himself appears to Paul to encourage him but also to indicate that just as he testified for him in Jerusalem, so he will also testify concerning him in Rome.

Verse 12 begins a new day and a new section in the story. We are told that a group of more than 40 Jews had joined themselves in a conspiracy to kill Paul. They had taken an oath to neither eat nor drink until he was dead. The phrase that they used to denote their binding themselves with an oath is something like “with an oath we have oathed” (Ἀναθέματι ἀνεθεματίσαμεν). Another way to translate this might be we have “cursed ourselves with a curse”. They are saying may we be “damned to damnation” if we do not kill Paul. It is highly likely that these zealous men will have used precedents within Judaism, which would have allowed them to be released from this oath as it was going to be impossible to fulfill (*Mishnah Nedarim* 3.3).<sup>11</sup> This probably means that they did not starve

---

<sup>11</sup> J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 428.

themselves to death or die of thirst. They were likely not that honorable.

It is of interest that at verse 14 these murderous intentions are brought to the attention of the chief priests and the elders to induce them to join in the conspiracy to commit murder. Luke wants us to understand that these supposed leaders of Israel are far more interested in retaining power and authority than they are in righteousness and justice. This is another indication that they have forfeited any right they might have once possessed to lead God's people. The contrast with Paul and his attitude is striking. There is no absolute indication here that the leaders agreed with this plan, but it appears fairly obvious that they did as they did not appear to report this to the Romans and they actually pursue Paul to Caesarea (24:1) seeking his condemnation and, in the report of Paul's nephew, their complicity in this plot is indeed reported to the tribune.

At verse 16 we learn that Paul has a sister and that her son heard of the conspiracy against Paul's life and he

goes and tells Paul (verse 16). Paul asks for his nephew to be taken to the tribune to report his accusations and after hearing his report the tribune asks him to tell no one that he had informed him. He then summons two of his centurions to gather a formidable force to transport Paul to Caesarea and safety with the governor. This is an opportunity to get rid of the person who has been nothing but trouble and to transfer his problem to others, in this instance to Felix. We finally learn at verse 26 the name of the tribune; it is Claudius Lysias. He writes a letter to the governor Felix explaining the situation with regard to Paul.

Verse 31, the soldiers follow their instructions and take Paul to Antipatris during the night. This is a city rebuilt by Herod the Great to honor his father and is located about halfway (35 to 45 miles from Jerusalem) to Caesarea. At this point the infantryman returned to Jerusalem while the 70 cavalrymen continued to escort Paul to his destination. Upon arrival, the letter of the tribune is presented to the governor who inquires regarding Paul's provincial home. When he learns that it is Cilicia, which was under his

administrative purview, he agrees to hear the case as soon as his accusers arrive. Paul will be kept in custody while he awaits the arrival of his accusers.

# Synopsis

---

This chapter begins with Paul being taken by the tribune before members of the Jewish council in order to find the underlying cause of what is causing such a violent reaction from the Jews to Paul's presence. During Paul's appearance before this group it becomes apparent that they are not interested in justice as they order Paul to be struck in the mouth for no apparent reason. This incident then induces Paul to condemn this act that was ordered by the High Priest. This condemnation prompts the lackeys of the High Priest to accuse Paul of breaking the law.

Paul responds to this accusation with either an apology or a very satirical reply that condemns the actions of the High Priest as actions that make him unrecognizable as the High Priest. Paul then takes the opportunity afforded to him to introduce a topic that divides the council in controversy over the issue of resurrection from the dead. He indicates that it over this issue that he is on trial. Some of the scribes who were Pharisees then declare that they

find nothing wrong with this man. The dissension then becomes so violent that the tribune had Paul removed by force before he is torn to pieces.

Paul is reassured by the appearance of the Lord himself that he is following his will in testify in Jerusalem, and that he will also testify concerning him in Rome. After this, much of the rest of the chapter is devoted to information and the Roman response to a plot involving 40 plus Jews to assassinate Paul. The plot is revealed to Paul and tribune through a nephew of Paul and the tribune then compiles a large force of troops to safely evacuate Paul to Caesarea where he is held in custody to await his accusers from the Jews.

## Main Points

---

1. Paul receives unjust treatment at the hands of his brothers, the Jews.
2. Paul indicates that he is on trial “concerning hope of the resurrection from the dead.
3. The Jewish leadership continues to demonstrate that they are unjust by their actions.
4. Paul is assured that he is following the will of the Lord by his direct appearance to Paul.

# Questions

---

1. How do you think Paul could say he had a clear conscience before God at 23:1?
2. What does it mean to have a clear conscience?
3. Why do you think Luke records the encounter between Paul and the High Priest in his account of the spread of the gospel?
4. How do you determine if you are following God or your own heart?
5. What does it mean to have “hope of the resurrection from the dead” for you?
6. What do you think it means for the Lord to appear to Paul?
7. What do you think drives people to the point where they will seek the life of others?
8. Why do you think the tribune seems more interested in justice than the Jews do?
9. What does it mean to take an oath?
10. Have you ever had others pass their problems off to you? If so how did it make you feel about the problem?