



Paul is Sent to Caesarea Acts 23

Introduction

Having been rescued from the hostile Jews by Roman soldiers, Paul was held in custody. The ominous prophecies of chains and tribulations had been fulfilled, perhaps much sooner than Paul expected.

Paul will remain a prisoner through the rest of the Book of Acts and will be forced to defend himself and his ministry on numerous occasions. He will give his testimony in the presence of two Roman governors and a king before being taken to Rome to appeal his case to the emperor.

But before leaving Jerusalem, Paul will be rescued twice again by the Roman commander: first from the members of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish council) and then from a group of overzealous conspiring Jews. It is exciting to see God moving Paul toward Rome and graciously protecting him along the way.

Outline of Acts 23

- I. Paul Faces the Council - Acts 23:1-11
- II. Paul Learns of a Conspiracy - Acts 23:12-22
- III. Paul is Saved by the Commander - Acts 23:23-35

I. Paul Faces the Council - Acts 23:1-11

The Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, took Paul before the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, hoping to discover the accusations against him. Paul eagerly spoke up in his own defense.

A. Paul Defends Himself - Acts 23:1

Before speaking, Paul looked *earnestly* at his accusers. Some commentators, who believe that Paul's *thorn in the flesh* (2 Corinthians 12:7) was poor eyesight, attribute the *looking earnestly* to his imperfect vision. However, Paul may have been courageously looking them in the eye to secure their full attention before speaking.

Paul answered the charges against him. In Acts 22:28, the Asian Jews had accused him of teaching against the Jewish people, the law, and the temple. Paul proclaimed that he had "*lived in all good conscience before God*" up to that very day. In other words, he had lived as a true and loyal Jew. He had said nothing against his people, the law, or the temple.

B. Paul is Struck on the Mouth - Acts 23:2-5

Ananias, the high priest (not to be confused with Annas in Acts 4:6), is described by the historian, Josephus, as an insolent, hot-tempered, profane, greedy man who stole tithes from the priests. In this instance, Paul's bold declaration caused Ananias' temper to flare and he ordered Paul to be struck on the mouth, a definite abuse of power. According to Jewish law, a person was presumed innocent until proven guilty. Before being punished in any way, Paul had to be tried and convicted.

1. Ananias, the hypocrite - 23:2-3

Ananias was a hypocrite in violating the law while sitting as judge over one who had been accused of violating the law. Paul was rightfully indignant! He called the high priest a "*whitewashed wall*." Just as mud walls were lime washed to conceal the dirt, Ananias looked fine on the outside but was corrupt underneath. Paul's words, "*God will strike you*," were a prophecy of Ananias' punishment for his actions. It is notable that Ananias did not die a natural death but was assassinated.

2. Paul's apology - 23:4-5

Some members of the council who stood near Paul rebuked him for reviling God's high priest. Paul apologized, explaining he had not realized the one who had given the command to strike him was the high priest. Paul knew and honored the law: "*You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people*" (Acts 23:5 as he quoted from Exodus 22:28). Whether or not the high priest was deserving of respect, Paul showed respect for the office he held.

Luke does not explain why Paul didn't recognize the high priest who usually wore high priestly robes and sat in a special place at council meetings. Not having been in Jerusalem for some time, Paul probably did not know who the present high priest was. Also, he may not have seen who had given the command to strike him. On the other hand, he may have known that it was the high priest and his words may express his perceived irony that a man who acted in such a way could really be the high priest.

C. Paul Causes Dissension in the Council - Acts 23:6-10

Paul knew he would not get a fair hearing before the

Sanhedrin. Realizing the council was made up of two opposing religious parties, the aristocratic Sadducees, who denied the resurrection and the spirit world, and the scholarly Pharisees, who believed in both, Paul set the two at odds with one another.

1. Paul was being judged for his beliefs - 23:6

Paul's father had been a Pharisee and Paul had followed in his footsteps. Like a good Pharisee, he believed in the resurrection of the dead. As a Christian, he also believed in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was not only his hope, but the hope of all mankind. However, the Sadducees' denial of the resurrection made Christianity impossible *for if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen.* (1 Corinthians 15:6). The Sadducees had opposed Peter and John when they taught the resurrection of the dead (Acts 4:1-2) and now they opposed Paul for the same reason.

2. Division in the council - 23:7-10

Paul's words had the desired effect of causing the council to divide against itself. The scribes, interpreters of the law, and Pharisees, came to Paul's defense. They found nothing wrong with Paul's teaching. Because they believed in the spirit world, they were not about to deny the possibility that an angel or a spirit had spoken to Paul revealing God's truth to him.

The contention in the council chambers became so intense that the Roman commander had his soldiers forcefully remove Paul and take him back to the barracks. Paul needed protection from the Jewish leaders just as he had needed protection from the Jewish people.

- D. Paul Receives Encouragement from the Lord - Acts 23:11

Back at the barracks, in the security of the Antonia Fortress, the Lord stood by Paul and spoke to him, calling him by name. This was Paul's fifth vision (Acts 9:4-6; 16:9; 18:9-10; 22:18-21).

1. Comfort - 23:11

The vision was a comfort. In spite of the heated opposition against him, Paul was given assurance that he would not be killed in Jerusalem. God was sending him to Rome where he would witness for Christ just as he had done in Jerusalem.

2. Confirmation - 23:11

In Acts 19:21, Paul had expressed his desire to see Rome, and God confirmed He would send Paul there.

II. Paul Learns of a Conspiracy - Acts 23:12-22

The day after the fiasco in the Sanhedrin, some of the more fanatical Jews formed a conspiracy against Paul.

- A. The Vow to Kill Paul - Acts 23:12-14

More than forty Jews bound themselves by an oath to neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. The Greek word for oath is "anathema," a word which signified their "cursing themselves with a curse." They were invoking God's curse upon themselves if they didn't fulfill the oath.

- B. Seeking Cooperation from the Council - Acts 13-15

The conspirators went to those in the Sanhedrin who would be most sympathetic to their scheme, the chief priests and elders. They explained their vow and their plan and asked that the cooperation of the whole council be sought in making the Roman commander think they were trying to help. The council was to ask the commander to bring Paul to them the next day for a more thorough investigation into his case. The conspirators planned to lay in wait, prepared to kill Paul as he was taken to the council chambers. The conspirators must have realized that some of them would also die since Paul was under the protection of heavy Roman guard.

- C. Paul's nephew intervenes - Acts 23:16-22

This is the only insight we are given into Paul's family life. Many commentators believe Paul's words in Philippians 3:8, *I have suffered the loss of all things*, refer to his being disinherited by his family because of his conversion to Christianity and commitment to Christ. However, his sister seems to have continued family ties with Paul, and her son apparently had a devotion to his uncle. It is not clear whether Paul's sister lived in Jerusalem. She may have lived in Tarsus and sent her son to a rabbinical school in Jerusalem.

1. Paul learns of the plot - 23:16

How Paul's nephew found out about the plot we don't know, but as soon as he did, he went to the barracks to inform Paul. Being an uncondemned Roman citizen held in military custody, Paul was allowed visits from family and friends.

2. The commander learns of the plot - 23:17-22

When Paul heard the news of the plot, he called a centurion to take his nephew to the commander. The

nephew then relayed the details of the plot to the commander, urging him not to listen to the council's request concerning Paul.

Before letting Paul's nephew go, the commander warned him not to tell anyone he had informed Roman authorities about the plot. The conspirators must not know their plan was to be foiled.

III. Paul is Saved by the Commander - Acts 23:23-35

Paul was not safe in Jerusalem and the commander had to act immediately.

A. The Commander Orders Paul Sent to Felix - Acts 23:23-24

As soon as Paul's nephew left, the commander called for two centurions and ordered them to prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to take Paul to Caesarea that very night. Felix, the governor of the province of Syria, resided in Caesarea. Although he was an evil man of dubious character, he would be better able to protect Paul. He also had authority to decide Paul's fate.

Paul was sent off under cover of night (*the third hour of the night* was three hours after sunset) with more than 470 men. Paul was also provided with a horse to ride. "We can see why God used Paul as his great missionary to the Gentiles. His Roman citizenship gave him the protection of the Roman laws and army..... How wonderful it is that God prepares His servants beforehand, even seeing to their birthplace and citizenship" (Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament, Warren W. Wiersbe).

B. The Commander Writes a Letter - Acts 23:25-30

The letter written by the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, explained to Felix, the governor, why Paul was being sent to him. "Claudius" was the Roman name the commander had adopted when he became a citizen (probably the name of the emperor at the time). "Lysias" was his original Greek name.

Addressing Felix as "*most excellent governor*" was not a reflection of the kind of man Felix was; it was merely his official title. The historian, Tacitus, gives some insight into the sort of governor Felix really was: "With all manner of cruelty and lust he exercised the functions of a king with the mind of a slave" (Histories, 5.9).

Luke writes in Acts 23:25 that Lysias wrote the letter *in the following manner*. Most likely, Luke did not have

access to the letter itself, but determined its contents based on the fact that letters of this type followed a general form. When prisoners were transferred from one jurisdiction to another, letters of explanation were always sent with them.

Lysias' letter makes four points concerning Paul.

1. "*I rescued him*" - 23:27

Paul had been seized by the Jews and his life was in danger. Lysias and his troops had "*rescued him having learned he was a Roman.*" Lysias had not really rescued Paul because he knew he was a Roman citizen. He had not learned that until some time later (Acts 22:25-26).

2. "*I brought him before their council*" - 23:28

Lysias had taken Paul before the Jewish council to try to learn the accusations against him.

3. "*I found....nothing charged against him worthy of death or chains*" - 23:29

The accusations against Paul had to do with questions concerning the Jewish law. As far as Lysias was concerned, Paul was innocent. He had not broken the Roman law.

4. "*I sent him to you*" when his life was threatened - 23:30

Lysias had been told of the plot by the Jews and had immediately sent Paul to Felix. He had ordered the Jews to take their accusations there as well.

Notice that no mention is made in the letter about planning to have Paul scourged (Acts 22:23-25). Lysias certainly did not want that to be known since he would surely be punished for such an infraction of the Roman law.

C. Paul is Presented to Felix - Acts 23:31-35

The soldiers did as they were commanded and snuck Paul out of Jerusalem by night. This was the third time Paul had to sneak out of a city. At Damascus, the disciples had let him down through the city wall in a basket at night (Acts 9:25) and he had left Thessalonica by night to escape to Berea (Acts 17:10).

1. On the road - 23:31-33

The soldiers accompanied Paul as far as Antipatris, a Roman military station about thirty-five miles from Jerusalem. The journey was through rough country

and took all night, but from Antipatris on, the chance of danger was most likely over. The remaining twenty-five miles to Caesarea were through open country and mainly Gentile communities. The foot soldiers returned to the Antonia Fortress and the seventy horsemen took Paul and Lysias' letter to Felix.

2. In Caesarea - 23:34-35

Felix read the letter and asked Paul what province he was from. This would help determine the location for a trial. A prisoner could be tried either in the province where the alleged crime was committed or in his own native province. Paul's home province of Cilicia was linked closely with the province of Syria. In fact, the governor of Cilicia was Felix's superior. Felix decided to deal with the case himself, but he would wait until Paul's accusers arrived. In the meantime, Paul was kept in the Praetorium, a palace which Herod the Great had built for himself but was now used as the headquarters for the Roman governor. It contained a guard room for prisoners.

Applications

1. Paul called Ananias, the high priest, a "whitewashed wall" because he was a hypocrite. He looked fine in his priestly robes as he presided over the Sanhedrin, but his heart was filled with corruption. God is not impressed by outward appearance, social status, or worldly power. God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). What does God see when he looks at your heart?
2. When Paul found himself in difficult situations, the Lord Jesus Christ was faithful to give assurance that He was with him and that all would be well as he continued in God's will (Acts 23:11 and also 18:9-11). Can you think of ways in which the Lord has given you assurance in the face of opposition and difficulty? The next time you find yourself in a seemingly hopeless situation, will you look to the Lord instead of looking at your circumstances?
3. When things looked the bleakest, God sent a young family member to help Paul. When has God unexpectedly sent someone to help and encourage you? Who can you help or encourage this week?