

ACTS CHAPTER 23 THE STRATEGY OF PAUL

Acts 23:1-10

"Paul fixed his gaze on the Sanhedrin and said, 'Brethren, I have lived before God with a completely pure conscience up to this day.' The high priest Ananias ordered those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Paul said to him, 'God is going to strike you, you white-washed wall! Do you sit judging me according to the Law and do you order me to be struck and so break the Law?' Those who were standing beside him said, 'Are you insulting God's high priest?' Paul said, 'I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest. If I had known I would not have spoken so, for it stands written, 'You must not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" Now Paul knew that one section of them were Sadducees and the other section were Pharisees, so he shouted out in the Sanhedrin, 'Brethren, I am a Pharisee and the son of Pharisees, and I am on trial for the hope of the resurrection of the dead.' When he said this a disturbance arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the meeting was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection nor angel nor spirit, while the Pharisees acknowledge both. There was a great uproar; and some of the scribes who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and argued and said, 'We find no fault in this man. What if a spirit or angel has spoken to him?' When a great disturbance was going on the commander was so afraid that Paul might be torn apart by them so he ordered the guard to go down and to snatch him out of their midst and to bring him into the barracks."

Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin

Paul rebukes the high priest

1) Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." 2) At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. 3) Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"

4) Those who were standing near Paul said, "You dare to insult God's high priest?"

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

Fifth time there is a defense of Christ to the Sanhedrin.

Gentile officers were never permitted to participate in the deliberations of the Jewish Sanhedrin.

Lysias had been appointed by Caesar and was responsible for the protection of any person who claimed to be a citizen of Rome.

Therefore, he commanded the Jewish rulers to appear before him where he could not be excluded.

There was a certain audacious recklessness about Paul's conduct before the Sanhedrin;

He acted like a man who knew that he was burning his boats. Even his very beginning was a challenge.

Paul's attitude was always:

1 Cor. 4:4 For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.

"Brethren" = offensive to them.

To say Brethren was to put himself on an equal footing with the court;

The normal beginning when addressing the Sanhedrin was, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel."

Paul's statement that he had live in all good conscience before God until this day drew the wrath of the high priest.

Annus, son of Nebedaeus, was the High Priest

Annus reference check (re: Josephus).

Glutton, tyrant, bigot and murderer.

He defrauded impoverished priests of tithes and

He sent paid servants to the threshing floors to steal corn

Any who resisted him were bludgeoned to death.

The Talmud speaks of unpardonable conduct when what remained of the sacrifices was completely devoured so that nothing remained for the hungry priests.

He was a "Barefaced hypocrite"

When Paul (Saul) went to Damascus with letters of authority from the High Priest to capture/kill Christian believers the letters were believed to be from Theophilus, the High Priest at that time. **Act 9:1-3**

Paul rounds upon him, calling him a white-washed wall; - calling him a grave.

To touch a dead body was for an Israelite to incur ceremonial defilement; it was therefore the custom to white-wash tombs so that none might be touched by mistake.

Paul is in effect calling the high priest a white-washed tomb.

Striking a witness in the mouth was a common way, even today of silencing the witness.

The high priest was not only to be the administrator of the law, but the example of it; his command to have Paul struck was in fact contrary to both the spirit and the letter of the law (Deuteronomy 25:1-2).

Deut. 25:1-2 *If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked. [2] And it shall be, if the wicked man be worthy to be beaten, that the judge shall cause him to lie down, and to be beaten before his face, according to his fault, by a certain number.*

When the high priest ordered Paul to be struck, he himself was transgressing the Law, which said,

"He who strikes the cheek of an Israelite, strikes, as it were, the glory of God."

Jesus was also struck when he was brought before Ananias (father or Caiaphas, the High Priest at the time of Jesus arrest. **Jon18.22**

It was a crime to speak evil of a ruler of the people (Exo.22:28).

Exodus 22:28 *Thou shalt not curse God, nor curse the ruler of thy people.*

Paul agrees that it is wrong to speak evil of the ruler of your people, considering the office more than the man; but Paul claims he did not know that Ananias was the high priest.

- 1) Poor eyesight? "Thorn in the flesh"? (as well as from early written church traditions).

Galatians 4:14-15 *And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. [15] Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.*

Galatians 6:11 *Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand.*

- 2) Uncertain identity at the time:

Paul had been away for several years and would not have known the then ruling high priest.

- 3) Not being a properly convened assembly of the national council,

The examination had been hurriedly arranged away from the normal meeting place in response to Lysias demand that he be present.

The high priest was probably not wearing robes of office.

- 4) Others think that Paul is being sarcastic here, with the idea

"I didn't think that anyone who acted in such a manner could be the high priest!"

Paul divides the Sanhedrin

6) Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." 7) When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8) (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.)

9) There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"

In the Sanhedrin there were Pharisees and Sadducees whose beliefs were often opposed.

Pharisees were the "fundamentalists" of their day: those who took the Bible seriously, even if they did err greatly by adding the traditions of men to what they received in the Bible.

Sadducees were the "religious liberals" of their day, and denied the reality of life after death.

The Pharisees believed in the minutiae of the oral Law;

The Sadducees accepted only the written Law.

The Pharisees believed in predestination;

The Sadducees believed in free-will.

The Pharisees believed in angels and spirits;

The Sadducees did not.

Above all, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead;

The Sadducees did not believe in the concept of resurrection.

Knowing this, Paul refers to his heritage as a Pharisee, and claims that it is concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead that he was being judged.

This was an essentially true claim; the center of Paul's gospel was a resurrected Jesus.

As a result the Sanhedrin was split in two;

Paul picked the right issue; framed in these terms, he immediately gained the Pharisees as an ally, and he let them argue it out with the Sadducees.

The Pharisees, in saying let us not fight against God, are returning to the previous attitude that their great leader Gamaliel advised in Acts 5:38-39.

Acts 5:38-39 And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: [39] But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.

This was the last sermon Paul would preach in Jerusalem.

Following the conclusion of this episode, Paul would never again set foot in the City of David.

Paul is rescued again by the Roman commander, and is comforted that night by Jesus

10) The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

In the violent argument that followed Paul was nearly torn in pieces.

To save him from violence the commander had to take him back to the barracks again.

Third time the Romans rescue Paul..

A PLOT UNMASKED

Acts 23:11-24

"On the next night the Lord stood by Paul and said, 'Courage! As you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness in Rome also.' When it was day the Jews formed a plot and laid themselves under a vow neither to eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who formed this conspiracy. They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, 'We have laid ourselves under a vow to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. Now, therefore, do you lay information with the commander, so that he may bring him down to us, as if you were going to investigate his case more thoroughly; and we are ready to kill him before he gets your length.' But Paul's sister's son was there and heard the plot. So he went into the barracks and reported it to Paul. Paul called one of the centurions and said, 'Take this young man to the commander for he has something to report to him.' He took him and brought him to the commander and said, 'The prisoner Paul called me and asked me to take this young man to you because he has something to say to you.' The commander took him by the hand and took him aside privately and asked him, 'What is it that you have to report to me?' He said, 'The Jews have gotten together to ask you to bring Paul down to the Sanhedrin tomorrow, as if they were going to make a more thorough investigation into his case. Do not you therefore agree to them for more than forty, who have taken a vow upon themselves neither to eat or drink till they have killed him, are lying in wait for him; and they are now ready, expecting your assent.' The commander dismissed the young man with instructions to tell no one that--as he said--'you have brought this information to me.' He called two of his centurions and said to them, 'Get ready two hundred soldiers, seventy cavalry and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at about nine o'clock in the morning. Provide baggage animals that they may mount Paul and get him through to Felix, the governor, in safety.'"

11) The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

The commander must now be certain that these Jews are crazy in their endless and violent disputes; previously, it was over the one word Gentiles, now it is over the one word resurrection.

The commander removes Paul for his own safety, and leaves him in custody in the barracks.

"The Lord stood by him" judged in faithfulness, not by success.

Jesus' physical presence (as it seems was the case) with Paul was a unique manifestation; but Jesus has promised every believer to always be with them.

Matthew 28:20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

The words be of good cheer, "take courage", tell us that the night has brought with it an emotional and perhaps spiritual darkness upon Paul;

Darkest night of Paul's life?

No prayer meeting effecting his release (re: Peter's imprisonment, Acts 12).

Paul is to spend two years in prison in Caesarea;

When he arrives in Rome, he is to spend another three years.

Jesus is here to cheer His faithful servant after he was well spent himself for Jesus' sake.

Paul's desire was to go on to Rome (Acts 19:21; Romans 1:9-12);

Acts 19:21 After these things were ended, Paul purposed in the spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome.

Romans 1:9-12 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; [10] Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you. [11] For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; [12] That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.

Sometimes we think that just because we want something greatly, it couldn't be God's will for us; but God often gives us the desires of our hearts (Psalm 37:4).

Psalm 37:4 Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.

Often the truth is that God gives us the very thing we want – whether it's His primary will for us or not.

Desires of your heart...

As you have said be it unto you...

This time the Lord's promise is especially precious;

by all appearances it didn't look like Paul would get out of Jerusalem alive, much less make it to Rome.

Paul could have been discouraged about the lack of results from the sermon in Jerusalem; but the results are not our responsibility.

Our responsibility is to bring the Word of God and to testify of Jesus; the results are God's responsibility.

Having been obedient to God's instruction, the greatest words a faithful child of God can hear are "there is more for you to do"; move on...

those words grieve the lazy servant of God.

The promise of more work to do was also a promise of continued protection;

Paul could not and would not perish until he had finished the course God had appointed for him.

"This assurance meant much to Paul during the delays and anxieties of the next two years, and goes far to account for the calm and dignified bearing which from now on marks him out as a master of events rather than their victim."

Paul is delivered from the plot of assassins

Forty men vow to kill Paul and set a trap for him

12) The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. 13) More than forty men were involved in this plot. 14) They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. 15) Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here."

Under certain circumstances the Jews regarded murder as justifiable.

If a man was a public danger to morals and to life they regarded it as legitimate to eliminate him.

So, forty men put themselves under a vow called a "cherem."

When a man took such a vow he said, "May God curse me if I fail to do this."

These men vowed neither to eat nor drink, and put themselves under the ban of God, until they had assassinated Paul.

Vow precedent:

1 Samuel 14:24 And the men of Israel were distressed that day: for Saul had adjured the people, saying, Cursed be the man that eateth any food until evening, that I may be avenged on mine enemies. So none of the people tasted any food.

Never underestimate the ability of men to rationalize!

Beware of the tendency for religious people to become instruments of evil and ruin the cause they profess to cherish...

There is nothing lacking in the zeal these men have; it is in fact an impressive display.

But their zeal is not according to knowledge (**Romans 10:2**);

Romans 10:2 For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.

Zeal and devotion in themselves prove nothing about an individual's right relationship with God.

In their zeal, they think nothing of lying to the Roman commander to carry out their plot; their commitment to God is rather selective!

Did these men who made the vow of fasting die, because they failed in their mission to kill Paul?

Probably not; the rabbis allowed for four types of vows to be broken:

- "vows of incitement,
- vows of exaggeration,
- vows made in error, and
- vows that cannot be fulfilled by reason of constraint"

- exclusions allowing for almost any contingency.

Paul's nephew hears of the plot and warns the Roman commander

16) But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

17) Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." 18) So he took him to the commander.

The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you."

19) The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?"

20) He said: "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. 21) Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request."

22) The commander dismissed the young man and cautioned him, "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me."

"A secret is something you tell one person at a time..." [What a "coincidence" that Paul's nephew was able to overhear the plot, etc.]

God's use of children:

Captive maid

2 Kings 5:2 And the Syrians had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she waited on Naaman's wife.

Willing lad

John 6:9 There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?

Fortunately their plan was laid bare by Paul's nephew.

Neither coincidence nor accident that Paul's nephew (Paul's sister's young son) was in earshot of the plan to kill Paul, it was part of God's program for Paul.

That the commander "Took him by the hand" implies he was a young child.

Paul was a prisoner; but he was a Roman citizen and therefore the commander mobilized a small army to see him taken in safety to Caesarea to be tried before Felix.

If a Roman citizen was murdered the consequences would be grave...

At some point in their walk, most believers ask, 'How can I know what God wants me to do?'

And, like Elijah in I Kings 19, they sit in a dark cave, wondering.

Like Elijah, they feel the earth shaking — but the Lord is not in the earthquake.

They see the fire glowing — but the Lord is not in the fire.

They watch the wind blowing — but the Lord is not in the wind.

Many people are still looking for an earth-shaking confirmation, a fiery illumination, or a wind to blow them in Divine direction.

As Elijah discovered, God's is a still, small voice.

1 Kings 19:12 And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

The Lord whispers in your heart, writes desires upon your heart, and then gives confirmation to your heart through situations and people around you.

It is wonderful to be seek God's will and be able to say,

'Father, this is the desire of my heart. I'm going to pursue this course, knowing You will close and open doors — as You lead me in a supernaturally natural way.'

For whatever question you face presently, just make sure your heart is open to the Lord

— and He'll have a nephew in the right place at the right time who will overhear a conversation, go to the Roman captain, and set events in motion.

The world will call it luck, but you'll see the hand of God in it.

THE CAPTAIN'S LETTER

Acts 23:25-35

"The commander wrote a letter to the following effect, 'Claudius Lysias to his excellency Felix, the governor--greetings! When this man was seized by the Jews and when he was going to be murdered by them, I stepped in with the guard and rescued him, for I learned that he was a Roman citizen. As I wished to discover the charges on which they accused him, I brought him down to their Sanhedrin. I found that he was accused of some questions of their Law and was under no charge deserving of death or bonds. When it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man. I immediately sent him to you and I ordered his accusers to make their statement against him before you.'

Paul escapes to Caesarea, with a full military escort and letter referring his case to the provincial governor

23) Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. 24) Provide mounts for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix."

25) He wrote a letter as follows: 26) Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings. 27) This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. 28) I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. 29) I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. 30) When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him.

31) So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris. 32) The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. 33) When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him.

Claudius Lysias wrote his letter, absolutely fair and completely impartial,

Notice that Claudius implies that he learned of Paul's Roman citizenship right away,

He says nothing of the way Paul was bound twice and almost scourged for the same of interrogation.

His assessment is that Paul had nothing charged against him worth of death or chains.

The letter amounted to a letter of acquittal of any serious charge against Paul!

The seat of Roman government was not in Jerusalem but in Caesarea.

It was 60 miles from Jerusalem to Caesarea

Antipatris was 25 miles from Caesarea between Joppa and Caesarea.

Two kinds of provinces: Senatorial and Imperial.

Cilicia, where Paul was taken was an imperial province under direct control of the emperor himself.

God is preparing and laying the steps to bring Paul face-to-face with emperor Nero...

The soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul up and brought him by night to Antipatris.

Garrison at Antonia in Jerusalem was approximately 1000 men.

Spearmen = dexiolabous: graspers, lance-men.

Up to Antipatris from Jerusalem the country was dangerous and inhabited by Jews;

after that the country was open and flat, quite unsuited for any ambush and largely inhabited by Gentiles.

So at Antipatris the main body of the troops went back and left the cavalry alone as a sufficient escort.

On the next day they returned to barracks, leaving the cavalry to proceed with him.

The cavalry came into Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor and set Paul before him.

The governor to whom Paul was taken was Felix and his name was a byword.

Tacitus: Felix = master of cruelty and lust, who exercised powers of a king in the spirit of a slave.

Scoundrel who exploited political situation; encouraged conflicts and confiscated any loot that became available. During his rule, the countryside became a center of anarchy and the mountains of Judea became havens from which guerilla fighters operated. Hated by everybody.

For five years he had governed Judaea (Pilate's successor as Governor of Judea)

For two years before that he had been stationed in Samaria;

He had still two years to go before being dismissed from his post.

He had begun life as a slave.

Made a free man by Antonia, mother of the emperor, Claudius.

His brother, another liberated slave, Pallas, was the favorite of Nero.

Through the influence of Pallas, Felix had risen first to be a freedman and then to be a governor.

He was the first slave in history ever to become the governor of a Roman province.

He had actually been married to three princesses one after another.

The name of the first is not known;

the second was a grand-daughter of Antony and Cleopatra;

the third was Drusilla, the daughter of Herod Agrippa the First.

He was completely unscrupulous and was capable of hiring thugs to murder his own closest supporters.

It was to face a man like that that Paul went to Caesarea.

When Felix had read the letter and had asked from what province he came, and when he had found out that he was from Cilicia, he said,

'I will hear your case when your accusers are here also'; and he ordered him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium."

The praetorium is the residence of a governor; and the praetorium in Caesarea was a palace which had been built by Herod the Great.

Paul awaits trial in Caesarea

34) The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, 35) he said, "I will hear your case when your accusers get here." Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.

Herod's judgment hall was neither a dungeon nor a prison, but rather a palace on the beach of the Mediterranean.

Paul was in for some R & R in protective custody on the beach — in fact, two years' worth, as we'll see in Chapter 24.