

30. Paul Appears before the Sanhedrin: Acts 23

In Acts 22, the Jews tried to kill Paul, but the Roman commander intervened. He had ordered Paul beaten in order to find out what he had done to cause all the trouble. The centurion in charge discovered that Paul was a Roman citizen and told the commander. Since it was unlawful to punish a Roman citizen without a trial, the commander brought Paul before the Sanhedrin. Acts 22:30 tells of this:

30 The next day, since the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.

As the comments on Acts 22 have noted, the Sanhedrin was the supreme council and tribunal of the Jews, headed by a High Priest and having religious, civil, and criminal jurisdiction (Webster's Online Dictionary). The Jews considered the origin of their council to be in Num 11:16: "16 The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting that they may stand there with you." However, the Romans established ruling councils in their conquered territories composed of 71 citizens and called the Sanhedrin—a word of Greek origin. The gospels do not use this Greek word in the early days of Christ's ministry, causing some to suggest that the Romans established this council to counteract the abuses of Herod. Whatever the case, the chief priests and elders of the Jews made up the tribunal before which Paul is to appear.

Paul defends himself in Acts 23, this time, before the Sanhedrin.

Paul Appears before the Sanhedrin

Acts 23:1

23 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."

When Paul speaks of his good conscience, he uses a word that has the same meaning in Latin and Greek. In both languages, and thus, in English, the word is a compound word from a preposition that means *with* and a verb that means *to know*. Therefore, conscience is a knowing together with oneself, according to a standard internalized by teaching or intuition. For all men, the violation of the conscience results in guilt. Once true worshipers are cleansed, they no longer feel the guilt of sin, according to Heb 10:2: "For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins." Heb 10:19-23 details how the conversion of the saints cleanses the conscience:

19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

The culmination of conversion ends with the washing of water (baptism). Peter wrote in agreement with Paul in 1 Peter 3:21-22:

21 and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also — not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ

Our conscience, like Paul's, verifies the righteousness of our acts, measuring them against the commands of the gospel. However, when Paul was a practicing Jew, his conscience was also approving of his acts, even though he murdered and slaughtered Christians. One's conscience can only be the guide to matters of religion when the standard against which it makes judgments is the New Testament.

In 2 Cor 1:12-13, Paul's conscience testified to him according to the holiness and sincerity that are from God. Using any other standard to approve acts may provide a good conscience, but it will not justify one before God:

12 Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

Christians, who conduct themselves with the "holiness and sincerity that are from God", need never to have guilt feelings or a guilty conscience.

Acts 23:2-5

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.'"

That the high priest Ananias could order that they strike Paul shows the degree to which the Romans delegated power to the Sanhedrin. They could even pronounce a death penalty; however, such a penalty needed the additional approval of the Roman governor. Paul's response was a similar condemnation to the one Jesus gave in Matt 23:27-28:

27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Apparently, the law to which Paul referred was Roman law, which forbade striking a citizen without trial. Since Paul had just arrived in Jerusalem after several years of absence, he would not know who the high priest was. When it was called to his attention, he immediately apologized, citing the Old Testament law of the Jews in Ex 22:28: "28 Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people."

Paul Turns Their Attention to the Resurrection

Acts 23:6-8

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.)

Paul called on the differences between the Sadducees and the Pharisees to divide the assembly, since as verse 8 defines them, "Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all." Paul himself was a Pharisee and so was his father. Paul had come out of the Jewish community in Tarsus, which had been highly respected by the Romans, who had made many of the Jews Roman citizens. His father being a Pharisee partially explains why Paul went as a youth to study at the feet of the leading scholar Gamaliel. In his defense in Acts 22:2b-3, Paul cited this fact as part of his credentials: "Then Paul said: 3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today."

Division in the assembly ensued.

The Pharisees Side with Paul

Acts 23:9-10

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?" 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.

The chaos that followed had the Pharisees defending Paul, on the basis that he could be inspired, hearing from a spirit or an angel, since they believed in such beings. The crowd became so hostile that the commander had to rescue Paul lest the angry crowd tear him to pieces. The troops took Paul by force and brought him to the barracks.

The Lord Visits Paul

Acts 23:11

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."

From this point on, as the narrative covers Paul's trials in Jerusalem and Judea, the readers know that the Jews will not be successful in harming Paul, for the Lord is taking him to testify in Rome. Paul had previously aspired to go to Rome in Acts 19:21: "21 After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. 'After I have been there,' he said, 'I must visit Rome also.'" Later in his letter to the Romans in Rom 1:14-15, Paul expressed both his desire and obligation to preach in Rome: "14 I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. 15 That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome."

The Jews Conspire to Murder Paul

Acts 23:12-22

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."

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."

Luke tells perfectly the story of how the Jews plotted to murder Paul, of how the chief priests and elders were enablers and co-conspirators, and of how Paul, with the help of his nephew, foiled the plot.

These events of trial and abuse in Jerusalem would certainly be similar to those troubles that he describes fully in 2 Cor 6:3-10, where we gain understanding about how very hard it was for him:

3 We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. 4 Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; 5 in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; 6 in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; 7 in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; 8 through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; 9 known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; 10 sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Paul barely escapes with his life.

The Commander Sends Paul to Governor Felix

Acts 23:23-30

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.

The commander was taking no chance of losing his prisoner—a Roman citizen—to the Jews. He assigned an inordinately large attachment of soldiers to protect Paul as he journeyed to Caesarea where they were to give over Paul to the Roman governor, Felix. He also insured Paul's security even the more by having them leave at night.

In his letter, the commander attests that he found no guilt in Paul worthy of death, since the violations asserted against him were of the Jewish law. The commander had also ordered the accusers to appear before Felix to present their charges.

The stage is set for Paul's defense before Felix.

Governor Felix Agrees to Hear Paul

Acts 23:31-35

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. 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.

In his previous encounters, Paul had cited his province, Cilicia, in an effort to advance his credibility with the Jews. In Acts 21:39, he said, "39 Paul answered, 'I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people.'" Further in Acts 22:2b-3, he repeated, "Then Paul said: 3 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.'"

Felix seemed to know immediately the importance of his being a Roman citizen from Cilicia. Paul benefited in two ways: the hearing would occur right away, as soon as his accusers arrived, and his quarters would be in Herod's palace and not in a common jail. The Romans continue to extend such courtesies even during his imprisonment in Rome which Acts 28:30-31 describes:

30 For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. 31 Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 24 chronicles Paul's defense before Felix, after whom he will appear before Porcius Festus, a governor, and Agrippa, the king.