

PAUL BEFORE THE COUNCIL

TEXT: ACTS 23:1-35

INTRODUCTION:

1. When the chief captain discovered Paul was a Roman citizen, he thought it best to bring Paul to the council of Jewish leaders (Sanhedrin) and let them handle the dispute (22:30).
2. But these men were just as mad and violent as the mob in the temple, and so once again the chief captain had to rescue Paul before he was "pulled in pieces of them" (23:10).

I. PAUL SPEAKS TO THE COUNCIL (23:1-10).

1. Before he spoke, Paul "earnestly" looked over the council (23:1). Perhaps he recognized some of the men. Perhaps he was noting the different Pharisees and Sadducees (cf. 23:6).
2. Paul began his speech by saying he had lived in "good conscience before God" (23:1).
3. Later on, Paul made a similar statement to Felix, recorded in Acts 24:16, "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men."
4. The dictionary defines conscience as the faculty, power or principle within us, which decides right and wrong; the lawfulness or unlawfulness of our own actions and affections, and instantly approves or condemns them.
5. The Bible refers many times to the importance of having a good conscience. Hebrews 13:18 says, "Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly."
6. In I Timothy 1:5, Paul refers to a pure heart, and a good conscience, and faith unfeigned. And then in I Timothy 3:9 and II Timothy 1:3, Paul refers to "a pure conscience."
7. John 8:9 refers to the scribes and Pharisees "being convicted by their own conscience."
8. First Timothy 4:2 speaks of devilish, hypocritical sinners "having their conscience seared with a hot iron."
9. As soon as Paul mentioned his good conscience before God, "the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth" (23:2).
10. Charles Ryrie says this Ananias was "a notoriously unscrupulous high priest appointed in 47 and assassinated in 66" (*The Acts of the Apostles*).

11. Historians say Ananias was a notorious glutton, thief, and robber.
12. It is interesting to note that Paul said, "God shall smite thee" (23:3), and God did smite him just a few years later, in the year 66 AD.
13. John Phillips said this Ananias "was one of the most mercenary men ever to bring dishonor on what had once been a noble office. He was extremely wealthy and very influential. His infamous career of greed and graft continued so long as he was in office, and when he was replaced as high priest he continued to use 'Mafia' methods to advance his interests" (*Exploring Acts*).
14. Today's religious leaders are just as crafty and hypocritical as Ananias. Timothy Dolan is a "cardinal," and the Archbishop of New York. Before he relocated here he was the Archbishop of Milwaukee.
15. He has been accused by child-abuse victims of taking part in a decades-long cover-up by the archdiocese of Milwaukee of sexual abuse perpetrated by Roman Catholic priests.
16. While working in Milwaukee, Mr. Dolan initiated a policy to pay pedophile priests to leave the Roman Catholic priesthood. Each molester was given \$20,000 to leave quietly. Dolan also transferred \$57 million into a trust to protect it from legal claims by sex abuse victims.
17. These are the sort of unscrupulous men that move up the ranks of the Roman Catholic priesthood.
18. Paul responded to Ananias the high priest with a sharp retort, calling him "a whited (whitewashed) wall," in other words, a hypocrite -- corrupt inside but whitewashed on the outside (23:3).
19. Those that stood by said, "Revilest thou God's high priest?" (23:4), meaning it was improper to denounce a high priest put there by God.
20. This passage has stirred debate over the years. Some have questioned whether or not Paul was right to be so indignant. Some say Paul lost his temper and violated our Lord's command in Matthew 5:39 -- "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."
21. Paul may have been indignant, but sometimes it is good to be indignant. Certainly our Lord was indignant when He overthrew the tables of the moneychangers (Matthew 21:12).
22. And certainly our Lord was indignant when He repeatedly denounced the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites in Matthew 23.
23. Another question would be, if Paul was right to scornfully rebuke the high priest, then why did he apologize?

24. And then say that he did not know that Ananias was the high priest (23:5)? Perhaps Paul could not see very well. Some say he had problems with his eyesight. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me" (Gal. 4:15).
25. Perhaps Ananias was not dressed in the distinctive robes of the high priest that would have set him apart from the others.
26. Some have suggested Paul was being sarcastic. I have heard people say that Christians should never be sarcastic, but we see several examples of sarcasm in Scripture.
27. Elijah the prophet was sarcastic when he mocked the prophets of Baal. First Kings 18:27 says, "Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked."
28. Paul himself was sarcastic in Galatians 5:12. Referring to the Judaizers who insisted that circumcision was necessary for salvation, Paul said, "I would they were even cut off which trouble you."
29. Albert Barnes and other scholars say that perhaps Paul was being ironic (softer than sarcasm), "as if he had said, 'Pardon me, brethren, I did not consider that this was the high priest. It did not occur to me, that a man who could conduct thus could be God's high priest.'"
30. Here is something else to consider -- it is possible to respect an office (high priest, mayor, governor, president, etc.), and yet have nothing but contempt for the person holding that office. Here in the USA, many of our elected officials are dishonest, immoral, pro-abortion, pro-homosexual, etc. As Christians we must respect the office though we dislike the wicked people holding these positions.
31. Paul successfully divided the council by telling them he was a Pharisee, and the son of a Pharisee (23:6). This defence has also raised questions. Rather than boldly declare his faith in Christ, Paul referred to the "hope and resurrection of the dead" (23:6).
32. Perhaps Paul said this because he knew he would never get a fair trial with men like Ananias. His words divided the Sanhedrin, and if this was Paul's intention, it worked.
33. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, but the Sadducees did not, so Paul's statement caused an uproar (23:6-10).
34. Paul's remark in Acts 24:21 indicates he later regretted saying it.

II. PAUL IS WARNED OF THE CONSPIRACY TO KILL HIM

1. After the tumultuous meeting with the council, the Lord appeared to Paul with words of encouragement -- "Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome" (23:11).
2. This meant that no matter what happened in Jerusalem, Paul would get out of there alive and would go on to "bear witness" in Rome also.
3. This is the third recorded visit, not counting his conversion (cf. 18:9; 22:17).
4. Our Lord's gracious visit was very timely because the next day, more than forty Jews bound themselves together under a curse (an oath), saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul (23:12-14).
5. The conspirators made their plan known to the chief priests and elders, and some how Paul's nephew heard of it and warned Paul (23:14-16).
6. Paul then called one of the centurions, and asked him to bring his nephew to the chief captain (23:17, 18).
7. The *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says this about Acts 23:19 -- "This shows that he (Paul's nephew) must have been quite in his boyhood, and throws a pleasing light on the kind-hearted impartiality of this officer."
8. Indeed, the Roman chief captain appears to be a wise and fair-minded man, especially when compared with the murderous Jews.
9. The Bible does not mention the name of Paul's sister's son. He is not well known like Paul and Peter and Barnabas, but he did his part in rescuing Paul from the 40 murderous conspirators.
10. The chief captain moved quickly. He devised a plan to thwart the conspiracy (23:19-25).

III. PAUL IS SENT TO CAESAREA (23:23, 24).

1. The chief captain sent Paul under a large military escort to Felix the governor in Caesarea (23:23, 24). The chief captain wasn't taking any chances.
2. Furthermore, he sent a letter to Felix along with his soldiers stating that he believed Paul to be innocent (cf. 23:29).
3. The chief captain gave an honest straightforward report of what happened, but Tertullus, and the other Jews tried to turn the story upside down (cf. 24:7-9).
4. Paul and his escort left at the third hour of the night (9 PM), and they arrived safely, stopping off at first Antipatris (23:31). Antipatris was

a small town, nearly forty miles from Jerusalem, and was on the way to Caesarea. It was given its name by Herod in honor of his father, Antipater.

5. Felix read the chief captain's letter and told Paul he would listen to him as soon as Paul's accusers arrived (23:26-35).
6. "I will hear thee" (23:35) means, "I will give thee a full hearing."
7. Felix commanded Paul to be kept in Herod's judgment hall (23:35). That was the place where justice was administered.
8. Acts 24:27 indicates Paul was in Caesarea for two years.

CONCLUSION:

1. One of the wonderful things about reading the Bible is tracing the providence of God.
2. The Lord told Paul that he would get to Rome, but the Lord did not explain how.
3. Acts 23:16 says Paul's sister's son heard about the conspiracy but it doesn't say how he heard.
4. The chief captain saved Paul from getting killed on several occasions (21:31, 32, 35, 36; 22:22-24; 23:10, 18, etc.).
5. Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will."
6. Not only is the king's heart in the hand of the LORD, but so is the chief captain's!
7. I don't always agree with John Calvin, but I do agree with him when he said, "Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries. The highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it."