

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #50

Acts 23:1-35

The next day after the big uproar, Paul was taken to appear before the chief priests of the Temple and the Council, known as the Sanhedrin (22:30). These were the most powerful religious leaders in Jerusalem. They are steeped in Mosaic Law, they are steeped in ritual and they are steeped in legalism and steeped in tradition. These are men completely blinded by their religious beliefs and they have the power to kill you. This is a pressure packed meeting. What we discover in this chapter is this:

EVEN BIZARRE AND THREATENING AND INTIMIDATING SITUATIONS IN LIFE MAY BE SOVEREIGNLY USED BY GOD TO DIRECT US TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PERFECT WILL.

God can use false religion and faulty thinking of other people to accomplish His will in our lives. This is one big mess for Paul. It is nightmarish and yet God in His sovereignty is at work. He is orchestrating things because His plan is to get Paul to Rome and this is how He will do it.

SCENE #1 – Paul before the Jewish Council. **23:1-10**

Now Paul had been beaten by a mob of Jews and the Romans had taken him and were about to beat him when they learned he was a Roman citizen. So instead of beating him, they made him appear before this group, the Sanhedrin. This was a group of seventy men who were considered to be the best and brightest in Israel. Once one was elected to this group, he was elected for life.

The Sanhedrin was divided into two groups; the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees believed in God and the Scriptures and they adhered strictly to traditional teachings and interpretations that had been handed down to them in the years between the O.T. and the N.T. The Sadducees were intellectual scholars who rejected the supernatural. They didn't believe in angels or demons or a literal devil. They did not believe in any resurrection of the dead. They did believe in free will. At this council meeting there are seven council events that occur:

Council Event #1 - Paul said he had lived with a good conscience before God to this day. **23:1**

Paul began with a bold statement—"I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." That is what God's grace does; it will cleanse your conscience of all the evil and sinful things you have ever done. I understand this to mean that Paul is saying that his faith in Christ, his manner of life and his message of grace is right before God to this very moment. That is the way I interpret this and apparently that is the way the high priest interpreted it. Before Paul could say one more word, the next event occurred.

Council Event #2 - The high priest Ananias commanded Paul be hit on the mouth. **23:2**

The word "strike" (τυπῶ) is much stronger than just a slap. This was a strike that was more like a punch on the face (Smith, p. 452). Ananias ordered someone to punch Paul on his face.

This is not the same Ananias who helped Paul in Damascus. This Ananias was appointed priest in A.D. 48 and held the office for about ten years. He was known for taking bribes and stealing temple offerings. In fact, according to Larkin, who cites Josephus, he was known for beating people up to get their tithes (*Acts*, p. 327). He would actually take people's money and leave them destitute. He ended up being assassinated by Jewish guerrillas in A.D. 66.

To order someone hit on the face when they had not been convicted of anything was a completely illegal thing to do according to Jewish law. But Ananias was a corrupt religious leader and he did not care about what was right before God, so he ordered someone to hit Paul on the mouth. The Romans refused to hit Paul, but these Jews had no problem with it.

Council Event #3 - Paul did not turn the other cheek but warned God would strike him. **23:3**

We may recall that when Jesus was here he taught that if someone slapped you on your right cheek, you should not resist but turn the other cheek and let him smack you on your left cheek (Matt. 5:39). The Apostle Peter would say that if people hurl threats at us we should not retaliate (I Pet. 2:23). Apparently this was not one of those moments when this principle was applicable for Paul. Even the O.T. Law did not support smashing someone on the face.

Paul did not turn the other cheek here. In fact he called this religious phony a "whitewashed wall," which is another way of calling him a dead, religious hypocrite. We may remember that Jesus did the same thing when He addressed the Pharisees (Matt. 23:27). The Jews would paint tombs white as a warning not to touch them so as not to be defiled. But paint could not cover the deadness of what was inside. Paul called him a dead hypocrite and then said God would strike him, which in A.D. 66 God did; he was assassinated.

Now Paul's response has been questioned and debated by all who have carefully studied the book of Acts. Was Paul right or was he wrong? We have four possibilities of Paul's actions here:

- 1) He was justified in saying this because of the character of Ananias.
- 2) He was justified in saying this because there is a place for righteous anger.
- 3) He was justified because he is giving a prophetic prediction that God would strike him down.
- 4) He was wrong in what he did here and his reaction in verses 4-5 proves it.

Now some have said that Paul was wrong here, but I do not think he was and the reason why I don't think he was is because when Jesus shows up to speak with Paul, He doesn't tell him he blew it here. In **verse 11**, Jesus comes to Paul and there is no hint that Paul was wrong.

Council Event #4 - Paul did not know he had just said this to the high priest. **23:4-5**

1) Many suspect that Paul had serious eye problems and didn't know he was speaking to the high priest (Gal. 6:11). 2) Some have said that Paul had been gone and didn't know Ananias was the high priest because he was not wearing priestly garments. 3) Others have suggested that what Paul meant is that you don't think, act and talk like a high priest and since you don't obey the Law and act like you are a high priest, I will not treat you like one.

Whatever the view, the fact is Paul knew the O.T. Law of Exodus 22:28 that says you are not supposed to speak evil of a ruler of the people.

One old Bible teacher used to say "it isn't our mistakes that is our downfall, it is the pride that keeps us from admitting our mistakes that is our downfall." Paul appears to admit he was wrong here.

Council Event #5 - Paul decided to bring up the resurrection which was a point of theological contention between the Sadducees and Pharisees. **23:6-8**

Paul hadn't gotten anywhere talking about his conscience so he changes his verbal direction. Paul uses an interesting tactic here, which we must assume is led by God. He decides to bring up an explosive doctrinal matter, which was a hot point between the Pharisees and Sadducees.

First he addresses them all as "brothers" and then he identifies himself as a "Pharisee" and then he says he is on trial because of his proclamation of hope that centers on the resurrection. Paul was preaching that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is our hope that our sins may be forgiven.

He senses the tension between the Sadducees and Pharisees, so he reminds the group that the Sadducees deny the resurrection; they also deny the existence of angels or any spirit being. This put some of the Pharisees on his side.

Council Event #6 - Some of the Pharisees began to strongly defend Paul. **23:9**

Some of the scribes of the Pharisees stood up and started arguing in favor of Paul. This is absolutely bizarre. Talk about the sovereignty of God. The same people who hate Paul are now defending Paul.

Council Event #7 - The Roman commander ordered Paul taken to the barracks for protection. **23:10**

Once again the Romans are used by God to get him out of a terrible situation. Things became so intense that the Roman commander realized they needed to get Paul out of there or else he could literally be torn to pieces. So he ordered soldiers to get him and bring him to the barracks. Claudius Lysias, the Roman commander (**v. 26**), must have thought everywhere this guy goes there is trouble. Any time he speaks we have a riot on our hands. He must have thought that was sure a good idea I had to let him talk to the Sanhedrin.

What has Paul done to cause all of this? What is his crime? He preaches grace, not works. He preaches grace, not law. He preaches grace, not religion. He preaches grace, not ritual. He preaches that one is right with God by faith alone in Christ alone.

SCENE #2 – Jesus spends the night with Paul. **23:11**

The verb "stand" (εφίστημι) means that Jesus Christ came to be present with Paul (Smith, p. 192).

There are times in our lives when things are very dark and God knows we need an extra encouragement. Paul must have been at a low point. He was physically, emotionally and spiritual drained. Even the strongest of servants have their breaking point and apparently Paul was shot.

Jesus Christ actually came to Paul and stood by Paul's side and said "take courage." The word means cheer up and be confident and courageous (*Ibid*, p. 202-203). This word indicates that Paul was feeling whipped. Jesus told him he had been a great witness and he was going to Rome to be His witness there. This was the reason Paul was in this mess; He was witnessing for Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is with His people at all times, but He draws Himself very close to His people when His faithful people are in trouble. This is a very special moment, not a typical moment. Jesus Christ Personally spent the night with Paul. It was the next night. What a night that must have been. Jesus Christ Personally comes to a dejected Paul to commend him, comfort him and let him know his ministry was approved and appreciated and was not over.

Now Jesus does not reprove Paul for not turning the other cheek or for calling the religious leaders names. Nor does Jesus tell Paul he was wrong in going to Jerusalem. What Jesus did is stand by his side and told him to be courageous, because just as Paul had been a witness for Christ in Jerusalem and so also would he be a witness in Rome.

SCENE #3 – The Jews plot to kill Paul. 23:12-15

In contrast to the real work of God in which Jesus Christ is meeting with Paul, there is another diabolical meeting that took place the next day. More than forty Jews, "dagger carrying assassins," form a plot and take an oath to kill Paul. They vowed they would not eat or drink until he was dead. This shows you how zealous people can be for their religion. We have seen this type of evil zeal in our own lifetime. We saw it when religious zealots flew airplanes into the towers in New York. We see it when we hear of some religious zealot who ties some bomb to their own body to kill people. But no matter how much they plan, they cannot do anything apart from the sovereignty of God. They cannot kill Paul.

The truth is their plan would not succeed. They could take their vows and make up their plans but they could not touch Paul. Jesus has already met with Paul during the night, and so this meeting isn't going to accomplish anything except to be used as part of a process to get Paul to Rome.

People can form their plots and plans all they want, but you cannot touch or hurt a true servant of God unless God permits it. No one can do or accomplish anything apart from the sovereignty of God. No servant of God will ever die a premature death. God will continue to use His servant until the work is done.

SCENE #4 – Paul’s nephew is used to help rescue Paul. **23:16-23**

Living in the city of Jerusalem was the sister of Paul. To this point we didn’t even know that Paul had a sister. His sister had a son and God was going to use him in a major way. We don’t know anything about this boy. He apparently was a “young man” (**23:17**). The word Luke uses for “young man” (νεανίαν) means he was just a youth, a young boy. In **verse 19**, he was taken by “the hand,” which means he was very young. This is the first time we learn of any relative of Paul; but Paul’s nephew, the son of his sister, learned of a deadly plot and conspiracy to kill his uncle Paul and he came and told Paul of the plot. Whoever this boy was, he had courage and he also was taken to tell of the plot to the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias.

God is using the most unlikely of people to help deliver Paul; a young nephew who learns of the plot and goes to tell Paul. This is God’s protective sovereignty at work.

SCENE #5 – The Romans help Paul escape Caesarea for another hearing before Felix. **23:23-35**

Think of what happens here by sovereign direction of God. At 9 P.M., when it was dark, 470 Roman soldiers escort Paul out of Jerusalem to Caesarea. You have 200 of the best trained Roman foot soldiers, seventy of the best trained horsemen and 200 of the best trained spearmen and they are all assigned to guarding Paul (**23:23**). Not only that, but they provide mounts for Paul for a safe journey to Caesarea (**23:24**).

Claudius Lysias wrote a letter to Felix saying that Paul had done nothing to deserve death and imprisonment (**23:29**). Felix was very high in the Roman hierarchy. There are four major sources of historical data from this time in history: 1) The Bible; 2) Suetonius; 3) Tacitus; 4) Josephus, and all four talk about Felix.

Felix was born into slavery but was given his freedom either by the mother of Claudius (Tacitus) or by Claudius himself (Josephus). He rose high in Roman politics. He was the governor of Judea from A.D. 52-59. He was a corrupt politician. According to Tacitus, he was known for stamping out Jewish uprisings in brutal and ruthless ways. So this was his kind of case. As **verse 35** says, he agreed to give Paul a hearing.

The soldiers moved out at night and took Paul to an area located about thirty-five miles outside of Jerusalem called “Antipatris” (**23:31**). They spent the night there. Talk about security. One night Jesus Christ spends the night with Paul and the next night he is guarded by 470 Roman soldiers. The next day the horsemen took Paul on into Caesarea (**23:32**) and the other soldiers went back to Jerusalem.

I have wondered what happened to the zealots who took the vow. Remember, they promised they would not eat or drink until Paul was dead. Well the next day they probably started to get hungry and thirsty and Paul was very much alive. This shows you the folly of religious zeal that is not of God. They change things as they go.

Now what did Paul do that caused this mess? He preached grace salvation to a religious world that loves works.