

Acts Chapter 23

Acts 23:1 "And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men [and] brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."

“The council”:

The Sanhedrin (see notes on 4:15; Matt. 26:59).

The word “earnestly” here indicates, to me, that Paul wants them to believe.

He really does love them, and he wants them to know the truth.

This men and brethren here indicates to me, that Paul is saying, I am one of you.

Paul says I have nothing to apologize for, I have lived the life that God has called me to, even until this day.

Acts 23:2 "And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth."

“High priest Ananias”:

Not the Annas of the gospels (see note on Luke 3:2), this man was one of Israel’s cruelest and most corrupt High-Priest (see note on 4:6).

His pro-Roman policies alienated him from the Jewish people, who murdered him at the outset of the revolt against Rome (A.D. 66).

“Commanded ... to smite him”:

An illegal act in keeping with Ananias’ brutal character.

The verb translated “strike” is used of the mob’s beating of Paul (21:32), and the Roman soldiers’ beating of Jesus (Matt. 27:30).

It was no mere slap on the face, but a vicious blow.

This was not the Ananias that Paul had spoken of earlier who had become a Christian.

History (not the Bible), tells us this was a cruel man, a glutton.

Even though he was an evil man, he was high priest in the temple about ten years.

We see his cruelty and lack of respect for Paul when he has one of the men with him slap Paul in the mouth.

Acts 23:3 "Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, [thou] whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?"

“Whited wall”:

Ezek. 13:10-16; Matt. 23:27.

“Contrary to the law”:

Outrages by the High-Priest’s flagrant violation of Jewish law, He reacted by calmly asking the reason for the blow (John 18:23).

Paul’s reaction was wrong, as he would shortly admit (verse 5).

Although an evil man, Ananias still held a God-ordained office, and was to be granted the respect that position demanded.

Paul called him whited wall, because on the outside he had on the garment of the high priest, but underneath he was everything rotten.

I believe Paul recognized the high priest garment, but Paul knew that it was not God who had chosen him to be high priest.

The priest had no right to slap someone on the face.

Paul's righteous indignation flared up here.

This wicked high priest was killed brutally a few years later.

Thrust through by a dagger.

Acts 23:4 "And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest?"

“Revilest”:

Those standing near Paul were appalled by his harsh rebuke of the High-Priest.

“Revile” is the same word used (in John 9:28), to describe the Jewish leaders’ insulting remarks to the blind man whom Jesus had healed.

Peter used it to speak of the abuse Jesus endured (1 Pet. 2:23).

Acts 23:5 "Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people."

“I wist not”:

Some believe this to be another manifestation of Paul’s eye problems (Gal. 4:15); or that Paul was so angry that he forgot to whom he was speaking; or that he was being sarcastic, since Ananias was not acting like a High-Priest should.

The simplest explanation is to take Paul’s words at face value.

He had been gone from Jerusalem for many years and would not likely have recognized Ananias by sight.

That this was an informal gathering of the Sanhedrin (see note on 22:30), would have meant the High-Priest would not have been wearing his official garments.

“It is written”:

Quote from Exodus 22:28.

This again, shows that Paul knows in his heart that this is not a high priest of God's choice, but one self-appointed.

Acts 23:6 "But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men [and] brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question."

Ananias’ haughty attitude and illegal act convinced Paul he would not receive a fair hearing before the Sanhedrin.

Accordingly, he decided on a bold step.

As a Pharisee, and possibly a former member of the Sanhedrin (see note on 26:10), Paul was well aware of the tensions between the Sanhedrin’s two factions.

He appealed to the Pharisees for support, reminding them that he himself was a Pharisee, and appealing to the major theological difference between them and the Sadducees (see the note on verse 7).

Paul thus created a split between the Sanhedrin’s factions.

“Sadducees ... Pharisees”:

The Sadducees accepted only the Pentateuch as divinely inspired Scripture.

Since they claimed (wrongly, Matt. 22:23-33), that the Pentateuch did not teach that there would be a resurrection, they rejected it.

The Pharisees however, believed in the resurrection and afterlife.

Their beliefs were thus closer to Christianity than those of the Sadducees.

Significantly, the Scripture records the conversion of Pharisees (15:5; John 3:1), but not of Sadducees.

After the captain learns that he will not be allowed to beat the truth out of “Paul” since he is a Roman citizen, he determines to discover the truth by bringing Paul before the Jewish High “council,” the Sanhedrin.

As Paul communicates with the council, he discerns a very strong and hostile religious division.

On faction, the “Sadducees,” were a small, elite group composed of the priestly family.

The Sadducees were known for what they denied.

They rejected all aspects of the supernatural: miracles, angels, and the “resurrection.”

They rejected all of the Old Testament Scriptures except the Pentateuch, which were the five books of Moses.

Politically, they were liberal in order to win the favor of Rome.

They were therefore, able to control the office of the high priest, which was appointed by Rome.

By contrast, the “Pharisees were associated more with the common people and so exerted a stronger influence over them.

They accepted all the Old Testament Scriptures but also much tradition, which they regarded as the Oral Law handed down from the time of Moses.

They did accept the supernatural: miracles and the resurrection.

Paul’s family had for several generations been Pharisees; so Paul now identifies himself with them and appeals for support for his belief in the Resurrection.

Paul was able to direct the hostility of the Jewish council from himself toward its own members.

Here we see again, that the Holy Spirit of God has told Paul exactly what to say to get these two groups off of him, and fighting each other, over whether there is life after death or not.

Again, he has not lied.

He is a Pharisee.

Acts 23:7 "And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided."

Divide and conquer.

This is what Paul has done with just a few words here.

These Pharisees and Sadducees had been arguing for hundreds of years about life after death.

Acts 23:8 "For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both."

These people, who were supposed to be the learned people in the law, really knew very little about God.

The Sadducees did not even believe in the Spirit.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees had missed the whole meaning of the Bible.

The entire Bible, Old and New Testament, is focused on Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

And yet they did not believe Jesus of Nazareth to be the Christ (Messiah).

You see, they had not even understood the portion of the Bible that they had studied.

The point of (verse 8) is, that Paul got them stirred up and arguing among themselves to get their attention off him.

Acts 23:9 "And there arose a great cry: and the scribes [that were] of the Pharisees' part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God."

"Scribes that were of the Pharisees":

So intense was their theological disagreement with the Sadducees that they were willing to defend Paul, even though he was a leader of the hated sect of the Christians (24:5).

These scribes have realized that Paul is not doing all of this himself, but in fact, has the power of God on his side.

They bring up a very interesting question.

What if Paul is telling the truth?

If he is and they come against Paul, they would be fighting against God himself.

It is nice to know that there was someone who believed Paul.

Acts 23:10 "And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them, and to bring [him] into the castle."

It seemed there was such a battle going on between the Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes about Paul, that they were pulling him first one way and then the other.

The captain was remembering the fact that Paul was a Roman citizen and he wanted no harm to come to Paul.

He sends soldiers into this group and takes Paul by force out of their midst.

They carried Paul back into the castle to protect him.

Acts 23:11 "And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome."

“The Lord stood by him”:

The fifth of 6 visions Paul received in Acts 9:3-6; 16:9-10; 18:9-10; 22:17-18; 27:23-24), all coming at crucial points in his ministry.

“So must thou bear witness also at Rome”:

Jesus encouraged Paul by telling him that his desire (Rom. 1:9-11; 15:23) to visit Rome would be granted.

We see here, that the Lord does not send an angel, but appears Himself to Paul.

The Lord will never leave us or forsake us.

He is our very present help in trouble.

Paul really needed encouragement here.

It really looked like they were going to kill Paul.

We see from the statement the Lord makes about Rome, that no harm will come to Paul here.

He will live to testify another day.

The Lord will not allow anything to happen to Paul.

The Lord has a mission for him in Rome.

Verses 12-15

Over 40 men vow to kill “Paul” and then explain their scheme to the “priests.”

These would-be murderers, in presenting this illegal plot to the priests, must have regarded them as corrupt and blinded by hatred.

This band of men may have included those called the *Sicarii* (dagger-men) who roamed Judea assassinating their enemies with short daggers.

The Roman “captain” had earlier suspected Paul of being one of these murderers (Greek *sikarion*, Acts 21:38).

Acts 23:12 "And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul."

“Bound themselves under a curse”:

Literally they “anathematized” themselves (Gal. 1:8-9), thus invoking divine judgment if they failed (1 Sam. 14:44; 2 Sam. 3:35; 19:13; 1 Kings 2:23; 2 Kings 6:31).

What a terrible thing to do.

Paul would not die, until the Lord was ready to take him home.

This curse would surely come to pass, because they will not be able to kill Paul.

This just means they will surely starve to death.

If this vow was made to God, this was a serious vow.

Acts 23:13-14 "And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy." "And they came to the chief priests and elders, and said, We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul."

“Chief priests and elders”:

See notes (on 4:23; Matt. 16:21).

Being Sadducees, they would be more inclined to help the conspirators.

Significantly excluded are the scribes who, being mostly Pharisees had already shown their willingness to defend Paul (verse 9).

Taking vows of any kind was taught against by Jesus in Matthew in His Sermon on the Mount.

To take a vow to kill someone would be doubly wrong.

Thirdly, to tell the chief priests and elders was to include them in the sin.

Acts 23:15 "Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain that he bring him down unto you to morrow, as though ye would inquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him."

We see here, now they are trying to include the priests in lying to the chief captain.

These forty and the priests would all be guilty of murder.

The whole idea is to lie to the captain, and trick him into bringing Paul close enough, so one of these forty men under the oath can kill him.

Acts 23:16 "And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul."

“Paul’s sister’s son”:

The only clear reference in Scripture to Paul’s family (for other possible references, see Romans 16:7, 11, 21).

Why he was in Jerusalem, away from the family home in Tarsus is not known.

Nor is it evident why he would want to warn his uncle, since Paul’s family possibly disinherited him when he became a Christian (Phil. 3:8).

This nephew of Paul's overheard their plot, and somehow got into the castle, and warns Paul of their plan.

Acts 23:17 "Then Paul called one of the centurions unto [him], and said, Bring this young man unto the chief captain: for he hath a certain thing to tell him."

“Centurions”:

See note on 22:25.

Acts 23:18 "So he took him, and brought [him] to the chief captain, and said, Paul the prisoner called me unto [him], and prayed me to bring this young man unto thee, who hath something to say unto thee."

Paul had the centurion and the chief captain afraid for anything to happen to him.

They were eager to figure a way out of this problem with Paul.

The centurion was afraid not to carry the message.

Acts 23:19 "Then the chief captain took him by the hand, and went [with him] aside privately, and asked [him], What is that thou hast to tell me?"

This is very unusual for a captain to be talking to a prisoner at all.

It is even more unusual, for him to receive this young man sent by the prisoner to him.

This just shows that he is really afraid of Paul, because he is a Roman citizen.

The captain does not want to show weakness around his men, so he calls this young man aside to speak to him.

Acts 23:20-21 "And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul tomorrow into the council, as though they would inquire somewhat of him more perfectly." "But do not thou yield unto them: for there lie in wait for him of them more than forty men, which have bound themselves with an oath, that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him: and now are they ready, looking for a promise from thee."

You can see that even though these forty evil men have made this death oath, they really are in the wrong.

God has intervened and caused this young man to be just at the right place at the right time to save Paul.

This captain is eager to help Paul, but he has to live here with these other people, so he will have to be very clever in how he handles this.

He cannot let them know that he knows about their scheme.

Acts Chapter 23 Questions

1. Paul has lived how, up until this day in verse 1?
2. What was the name of the high priest present?

3. What did he tell those near Paul to do to him?
4. History tells us two things about this high priest, what were they?
5. What did Paul call this priest?
6. Paul said he judged him after the law, and hit him contrary to ____ ____.
7. What did it mean, when he called the priest a whited wall?
8. How does history tell us this priest died?
9. In verse 4, those standing around spoke out against Paul for what?
10. In verse 5, what does Paul say is written pertaining to this?
11. What kind of a high priest does this show that Paul believes he is?
12. When Paul saw they were divided into Sadducees and Pharisees, what did he tell them he was?
13. What did Paul tell them he was called in question about?
14. What did this cause among the multitude?
15. Which says there is no resurrection, Pharisees or Sadducees?
16. What other two things do they not believe in?
17. Who said they found no evil in this man?
18. They also said, if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against ____.
19. Why did the chief captain have soldiers to go down and get Paul away from the mob?
20. Where was Paul taken?
21. Who stood by Paul, and said be of good cheer?
22. Where would Paul live to testify?
23. Who banded together in a curse not to eat until they had killed Paul?
24. How many of them had taken the vow?
25. Who did they come and tell of their vow?

26. What kind of conspiracy had they schemed up to get Paul close enough to them that they might kill him?
27. Who overheard their evil plot?
28. Who does he warn of the plan?
29. What did Paul tell him to do?
30. What did the chief captain do, when the young man came to him?
31. Who has intervened and helped Paul?