

The Book of Acts Study Guide

Chapters 23-24

23:1-10

Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin/Council (the assembly of the leaders of the various factions of Judaism). His opening statement shows that His greatest concern was how God would judge Him, not how the leaders would judge Him. Ananias, the high priest, interpreted Paul's words in verse 1 as blasphemy and told people nearby to hit Paul in the face.

- v. 3 – Because Paul was hit in this manner, he informed Ananias that he had violated the Law. The high priest held the highest responsibility of administering the Law of Moses. The Torah did not permit spontaneous violent punishment (Lev 19:15). For any perceived wrong, witnesses needed to give testimony and the accused had to be given an opportunity to defend himself before being punished. Ananias did not do that here, thus violating the Law. He merely acted unlawfully in anger.

Paul also called him a “whitewashed wall,” which is a figurative way of describing someone who is hypocritically pious on the outside, but corrupt on the inside. History has validated that statement. Ananias held the role of high priest from 47 to 59 A.D. and this episode took place near the end of his term. According to Josephus, Ananias was known as a greedy man and he became rich by stealing from the tithes that were given at the temple, at the expense of the poorer priests (*Ant.* 205:206-7). He then used his wealth to gain influence with the Roman officials. So that did not endear him to the Sicarii (Jewish zealots), and in the year 66 A.D. they burned his palace and later killed him when they began the revolt against Rome.

- v. 5 – Paul used sarcasm to reflect the disconnection between Ananias as the high priest and his moral bankruptcy as a man. To put it another way, he was saying because of your actions and character, I would not know that you were the high priest. And that, of course, did not go over well in the Sanhedrin.
- vv. 6-9 – So Paul sought a way to find a measure of acceptance by appealing to his fellow Pharisees who shared common beliefs with him – especially the resurrection of the dead, but also angels and spirits (which could refer to demons or the nature of human beings having spirits). Those were all things that the Sadducees denied. So that caused a division in the Sanhedrin And even though the Pharisees denied the validity of belief in Yeshua, they exonerated Paul based on the issues at hand. He found a weakness in their religious system and exploited it. In this case, it was a house divided, in which one body had irreconcilable divergent beliefs.
- v. 10 – The Roman army commander sensed the potential for even greater problems, so he removed Paul from the presence of the Jewish leaders and confined him again.

23:11-22

At this point, things did not look good for Paul. The anger of the Jewish authorities had not abated and the Romans were not open to giving freedom to him. Rome, the city that had been on his heart for a long time, must have seemed impossibly far away.

- v. 11 – But it is clear that God knew Paul needed encouragement, so Yeshua appeared to him and without revealing how it would happen, He told Paul that he would still get to Rome.

- vv. 12-15 – The spiritual warfare in this situation is very apparent, with all of the step and counter-steps. Forty conspirators plot to kill Paul in a vigilante attack. That would demonstrate their dedication to the chief priests and elders who would only allow it to happen if the likelihood of success was high. Because oaths were binding obligations, and not eating meant they were committed in a suicidal manner, it would embolden the conspirators to follow through on it. It was believed that failure would invoke a curse from God.
- vv. 16-22 – Somehow, Paul’s nephew heard about the plot and he reported it to the commander. This development was important because if the conspiracy was successful in assassinating Paul, the Romans may have thought that the Messianic community would retaliate in a similar manner and that could lead to ongoing conflict in Judea. Such a situation would not be tolerable to the Romans who only wanted peace and order in their lands. So it is likely that they would have pursued the easiest solution by appeasing the larger community of Judaism and declaring the Messianic faith called The Way an illegal religion. That is how critical this moment in history was.

23:23-35

But by preempting the assassination, the Roman commander had an even easier solution at his disposal – he could shift the problem to someone with greater authority. So he made arrangements to transfer Paul to Felix, the governor of Judea who had his seat in the city of Caesarea.

- vv. 26-30 – Those arrangements included a considerably large contingent of well-armed soldiers guarding Paul during the transfer, and a letter to Felix summarizing the events and findings of the commander (that we now learn is named Claudius Lysias). His letter identified Paul as being a Roman citizen (which would secure his rights in the process) and he exonerated Paul of any charges of civil disobedience, leaving the problem in the realm of a religious dispute in Judaism (which was beyond the scope of Roman consideration).
- vv. 31-35 – Upon the arrival of Paul in Caesarea, Felix set in motion a hearing in which representatives from the Sanhedrin would make their charges against him.

24:1-9

The spokesman for the Temple leaders was an attorney named Tertullus. He first flattered Felix, no doubt hoping to gain favor with him. But in so doing, his words demonstrated his inclination to say lies, because his statement in v. 2 that peace and reforms had been attained under Felix, was far from the truth. In fact, dissension was building greatly in Judea and in a short time, Jewish zealots would begin their full-fledged revolt against Rome.

vv. 5-6 – Tertullus brought four charges against Paul:

- He was a pest (the same Greek word was used by Yeshua in Mat 24:7 to describe the pestilence or plagues that will come on the earth prior to His return). And that was probably the ultimate reason that the Jewish authorities hated him, because like a plague that diminishes the health of a community, Paul had diminished their ability to rule over the religious life of the Jewish people. But being a pest would not be a concern to the Romans.
- So Tertullus added that Paul “stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world.” That would get the attention of Felix because the Romans cared only about *pax Romana* (“peace established by Rome”) and would always put down anyone who disrupted it.

- The third charge was that Paul was the ringleader of the sect (*hairesis*, lit. “choice”) of the Nazarenes. The Romans did not look favorably upon new religions starting in the empire. But up to this point in time, Rome had not distinguished The Way from any other form of Judaism, like the Pharisees or Sadducees. Tertullus was trying to change that perception, and he enhanced it by called Paul the ringleader of the sect. His use of that kind of terminology implied that Paul was beginning a movement that could pose a threat to Rome.
- The last charge was that Paul attempted to desecrate the temple. Never mind that such a claim was untrue. But that charge would be of interest to Felix because the Romans allowed Jews to worship at the temple as they desired, but they know that any harm to the temple would inflame the passions of the people, and civil unrest would result. So once again, Tertullus was appealing to those things that would be concerns to the Romans

24:10-21

Paul’s defense ignored the charge that he was a pest. But he dealt with the other three charges:

- Regarding the charge that he stirred up dissension among the Jews, he simply stated the facts without embellishment and without making it personal. He just said there is no evidence supporting the charge against him that he stirred up dissension (vv. 12-13).
- Regarding the charge that he was the ringleader of an illegal sect, he was not ashamed to say that he was a follower of The Way. But He also showed that The Way was consistent with Judaism because he believed in the God of Israel, as well as everything that was in accord with the Torah and the Prophets, including the resurrection, all of which are a part of Judaism (or at least the Pharisaic branch of Judaism because of his belief in the resurrection). Another way of saying that is the Messianic faith *is* Judaism. In fact, it is far closer to biblical Judaism than many of the branches that exist today. But he wasn’t a ringleader. That describes someone who imposes his will on others. But Paul did not do that, and he stated that he did his best to maintain a good conscience before God and men. And you can’t do that if you are acting like a ringleader (vv. 14-16).
- Paul responded to the last charge that he attempted to desecrate the temple, he stated that he went about worshiping at the temple just like everyone else. He didn’t do anything that attracted a crowd. And the Asian Jews who were source of that charge did not come to Caesarea to give testimony in support of their accusation. Paul admitted that he believed in the resurrection, but that was not uncommon because the Pharisees believed that way (vv. 17-21).

Altogether, Paul’s defense was candid and truthful and he abided by the legal process. And that serves as an example to all of us when difficulty comes our way.

24:22-27

Felix was now interested in learning more, so he called for Lysias the commander to come and tell what he knew. He was also apparently desirous of learning more about The Way, so he brought his Jewish wife Drusilla to talk to Paul about Yeshua. He became frightened when Paul raised issues of righteousness, self-control and judgment in v. 25. That is a natural reaction when you feel guilt about your life. Times like that become a turning point – you can either turn away from your sin in repentance and faith, or you can dismiss the feeling of guilt and continue on living the same way. In this case, Felix took the latter course and only continued seeing Paul with the hope that he would

get a bribe. Paul then stayed imprisoned for two years until Felix was replaced as governor by Festus.

So in this chapter you can see the distinction between the morality and actions of the different groups—Paul, as a representative of the Way, religious leaders who claim to be pious but are hypocrites, and corrupt people of the world system. And that describes the exact same circumstances that we find ourselves today. So we can draw lessons for ourselves from the way that Paul conducted himself.