

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 23

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 against their authority and standing in the community, so he instructed men standing 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 as a means of protecting the rights of individuals against abuses. For any perceived wrong, witnesses needed to give testimony and the accused had to be given an opportunity to defend himself before being punished (Deut 19:15-19). Ananias broke that law by not following the stated procedure for violations. According to Deuteronomy 25:1-2, the one who claims to be the wronged party was not entitled to sit in judgment. Ananias did not abide by that judicial protocol. 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 – There are two explanations for Paul's apparent apology when he found out that the man ordering his punishment was the high priest. He may have simply made a mistake and was owning up to it. But it is also possible that he was using 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, would not go over well in the Sanhedrin.
- v. 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. Paul's strategy shows that 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.
- v. 12-15 – The spiritual warfare in this situation is very apparent, with all of the steps and counter-steps. Forty conspirators plotted to kill Paul in a vigilante attack. By enhancing it with an oath, it would demonstrate their dedication to the chief priests and elders who would only allow it to happen if the likelihood of success was high. Three additional cultural factors confirmed their commitment and further emboldened the conspirators to follow through on it:
 - Oaths were considered to be binding obligations.
 - Not eating meat indicated a suicidal dedication.
 - It was believed that failure would invoke a curse from God.
- v. 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.

- v. 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 (whom we now learn is named Claudius Lysias). His letter identified Paul as being a Roman citizen, which would secure his rights in the process. In addition, 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.
- v. 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.

From a human perspective, these events just seem to be either random in nature or explainable as a typical human drama. But, now from the vantage point of history, as recorded in Scripture, we can see that these events are all elements in the process of bringing Paul to Rome, which was essential in taking the Gospel to the nations of the world. So we are just reading about the fulfillment of God’s plan in the midst of human history.