

*Friends, don't get me wrong. By no means do I count myself as an expert in all of this, but I've got my eyes on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.*

Philippians 3:13-14 The Message Bible

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First Love Ministries, Inc.

Prayer Study #251

## THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

### CHAPTER 23

Paul is now a prisoner and will remain a prisoner for the rest of his life. In this chapter he is taken to Caesarea where he will spend two years appearing before several rulers. He finally appeals and is sent to Rome. But first we start off with Paul futilely addressing his own people and the Sanhedrin, composed of the Jewish religious rulers.

As we see Paul come to the last years and final season of his life and his imprisonment at Rome, we see a man who has been mightily used by the Lord. His ministry was not without cost. In his own words, he writes *"From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness-besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches."*

Paul was converted on the Damascus Road around AD 37. For the next 30 years he gave his life in service to Christ. During these years of service, the Lord continued to change him and to cause him to grow in humility. Twenty years after his conversion, he wrote, *"For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God"* (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:9). Thirty-six years after his conversion, he wrote to the Ephesians, that *"he was less than the least of the saints"* (Ephesians 3:8). Finally, thirty-seven years after his conversion, he came to the conclusion that *"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief"* (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:15). Sometimes around 67 or 68 AD on June 29<sup>th</sup> the Romans led Paul out to the Appian Way where they cut his head off.

As we come to these last chapters of Acts, we see a man who loved his own life less than he loved Jesus, a man who had holy boldness, and a

**man walked in the ministry and gifts of the Holy Spirit in a powerful way.**

### **Paul's Defense Before the Sanhedrin**

1. Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."
2. And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.
3. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?"
4. And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?"
5. Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, *'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'*"
6. But when Paul perceived that 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; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"
7. And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided.
8. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection-and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both.
9. Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man, but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God."
10. Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.
11. But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "**Be of good cheer, Paul, for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.**"

Paul gets off to a bad start in addressing the Sanhedrin. To call these men "men and brethren" was considered rude. They were usually addressed as "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel." For someone to call them brothers was to say that he was just as good as they were. This greatly angered Ananias who ordered that Paul be slapped across the face. What the High Priest was doing was breaking the law, which said, "Whoever strikes

the cheek of an Israelite strikes, as it were, the glory of God.” Paul reacted to this by referring to Ananias as a “whitewashed wall.” To touch a dead body was for a Jew to become ceremonially unclean. Therefore, the Jews would whitewash the tombs especially around the time of the Feast of Passover so that they could be clearly seen and thus avoided, leaving no one ceremonially defiled. Thus the High Priests, like the white washed tombs, looked clean on the outside but were full of corruption and filth on the inside.

Kevin Conner believes that, since Paul had been away from Jerusalem for a number of years and a new High Priest was in office and most probably the High Priest was not wearing his official priestly garments, Paul really did not recognize Ananias as the High Priest and thus was not guarded in what he said.

William Barclay, however, believes that Paul knew exactly whom he was addressing. He says that Ananias was well-known as a thief, a glutton, and a Roman collaborator. Barclay’s states, “Paul’s answer really means: ‘That man sitting there-I never knew a man like that could be high priest of Israel.’”

J. Vernon McGee has a position between Barclay and Conner. He believes that Paul would have known the High Priest and would have recognized him on sight. He believes, however, that Paul did not know this was the High Priest because he had an eye disease and did not see very well.

At any rate Paul was a former Pharisee, had been taught by Gamaliel, and knew every detail of the Law. He knew that the Law said that rulers were to be respected, even if they were bad (Romans 13:7). Thus, he apologizes for speaking in the manner he did.

Then Paul uses a brilliant strategy in his defense. Knowing that the Sadducees and Pharisees were on opposite ends of the spectrum, he expresses his Pharisaical beliefs and thus divides the Sanhedrin. The situation was no longer about Paul but about the different opinions between the two groups. The Pharisees were the fundamentalists of their day. They believed in the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, predestination, the minute details of the oral law, in angels and spirits, and in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees accepted only the written law. They believed there were no miracles, angels, spirits, or resurrection of the dead. So Paul turns this trial into a theological argument between the “fundamentalists” and the “liberals,” between those who believed in the resurrection of the dead and those who did not. This is not talking about whether Jesus arose from the dead. Neither of these groups believed that, and their hatred of Jesus was

one thing that united them. This is talking about Jews who died: Would they be resurrected from the dead or not?

When the Pharisees find out that Paul is a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee, they rally around Paul's theological position. They were not really interested in defending Paul but in defending their doctrinal position. The Roman commander, to avoid a riot, thus has no choice but to return Paul to the barracks.

The following night the Lord speaks to Paul to reassure him that he will also go to Rome and testify of the Lord there. This should put to rest the argument of those who say that Paul was in disobedience in going to Jerusalem, based on the verse in Chapter 21:4: *And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem.* McGee says that he believes that the Spirit is not telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem, but not to go unless he is prepared to make the required sacrifice and be willing to lay down his life for the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, McGee recalls the Lord's words to Ananias concerning Paul who had just been convert to Christianity: "...*Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name to the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel: For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake*" (Acts 9:15-16). He has borne witness of the Lord Jesus Christ before the Gentiles and before the children of Israel. Now the Lord has him on a journey where he will have his witnesses before kings: Before Felix in Acts 24, before Festus in Acts 25, before Agrippa in Acts 26, and possibly even before Nero in Rome. This had to start at Jerusalem.

### **Jews' Plan to Kill Paul**

12. And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.
13. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy.
14. They came to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul.
15. "Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquires concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes next."

16. So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.
17. Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him."
18. So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you."
19. Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside, and asked privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?"
20. And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him."
21. "But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you."
22. So the commander let the young man depart and commanded him, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me."

More than 40 men impose on themselves a fast and a curse until they kill Paul. Just like in the American South, you learn not to talk about anyone because the person you are talking to might be that person's relative. Well, in this case, the men talked too much and one of Paul's relatives, his sister's son, heard what they had to say and reported it to Paul and to the Roman Captain. Therefore, the Captain arranged for two centurions with two hundred soldiers under them, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to accompany Paul out of Jerusalem to Caesarea about 60 miles away. That is, at least 472 people accompanied Paul safely out of Jerusalem and about halfway to Caesarea before turning back. This was the last that Paul sees of Jerusalem.

#### **Paul's Rescue**

23. And he called for two centurions, saying, "Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night:
24. "and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor."
25. He wrote a letter in the following manner:
26. Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix:  
Greetings.

27. This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman.
28. And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council.
29. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains.
30. And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell.
31. Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris.
32. The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks.
33. When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him.

Not only did Paul get assured of safe travel, but he finally gets to ride instead of walk. Chief Captain Claudius Lysias sends a letter to Felix, the Governor, stating why he has sent Paul to Felix. The escort takes Paul out of Jerusalem at night and go as far as Antipatris about 25 miles from Jerusalem. His guard then returns to Jerusalem leaving only the seventy horsemen to accompany him to Caesarea.

### **Paul Is Tried Before Felix**

34. And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia,
35. he said, "I will hear you when your accusers also have come."  
And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.

The center of the Roman government in Israel was not in Jerusalem but in Caesarea, a city built by Herod the Great. The Praetorium was a palace that was serving as the residence of the governor. Claudius Lysias' letter was completely impartial. Felix was famous in those days because he had been a slave and was the first slave in history ever to become the governor of a Roman province. He was cruel and sometimes hired thugs to murder his own closest supporters. We will find as we move along to the next chapters that Paul is not defending himself as much as he is witnessing for Christ. And we will find that Felix was stirred by Paul's witness so much so that he trembled but postponed making a decision for Christ for a more convenient season which did not come.