

Bible Study Acts 23

PAUL IN PROTECTIVE CUSTODY, FROM JERUSALEM TO CAESAREA

A. Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin.

1. (Acts 23:1-2) Paul begins his speech before the council.

Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said,

“Men *and* brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.” And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

a. **Paul, looking earnestly at the council:** The previous day Paul saw a great opportunity go unfulfilled when the crowd at the temple mount did not allow him to finish his message to them, but started rioting again. Now Paul had another opportunity to win Israel to Jesus, and perhaps a *better* opportunity. Here he spoke to **the council**, with the opportunity to preach Jesus to these influential men.

b. **Men and brethren:** According to William Barclay, this address meant that Paul was bold in speaking to the council, setting himself on an equal footing with them. The normal style of address was to say, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel.”

c. I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day:

Paul probably thought this was an innocent enough way to begin his preaching. He didn't mean that he was sinlessly perfect and that his conscience had never told him he was wrong. Rather, he meant that he had responded to **conscience** when he had done wrong and had set things right.

i. Nor would Paul ever consider a clear conscience a way to be justified before God. "Paul might well appeal to the testimony of conscience as he stood before the supreme court of Israel; it was on no righteousness of his own, however, that he relied for justification in the heavenly court. The purest conscience was an insecure basis of confidence under the scrutiny of God."

ii. Paul's statement in [1 Corinthians 4:4](#) is relevant: *For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.*

d. And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by

him to strike him on the mouth: Paul's claim of a **good**

conscience offended the high priest. He thought that someone accused of such serious crimes should never claim a clear conscience.

- i. Or, perhaps, he was convicted in his heart by the inherent *integrity* of Paul's claim. He was a man with a **good conscience**, and it was evident in his speech and countenance.
- ii. No matter what his motive was, "This order was illegal, for the Jewish law said, 'He who strikes the cheek of one Israelite, strikes as it were the glory of God,' and 'He that strikes a man strikes the Holy One.'"
- iii. The **Ananias** who was high priest at this time did no honor to the office. He was well known for his greed; the ancient Jewish historian Josephus tells of how Ananias stole for himself the tithes that belonged to the common priests.
- iv. "He did not scruple to use violence and assassination to further his interests." Later, because of his pro-Roman politics, Ananias was brutally killed by Jewish nationalists.

2. (Acts 23:3-5) Paul's response to the punch in the face.

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?" And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" 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.’”

a. **God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!** We wish we knew *how* Paul said these words. It would have helped to hear Paul’s tone of voice; was it an outburst of anger, or was it a calm, collected rebuke with that much more weight to it?

i. Whatever the tone, the rebuke was entirely accurate and justified. The man who commanded that a defenseless man be punched in the face indeed was a **whitewashed wall**; a white veneer of purity covering over obvious corruption.

b. **For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?** Paul exposed the hypocrisy of the man who made the command.

i. The men of the council were supposed to be *example* of the Law of Moses. The command to have Paul struck was in fact contrary to both the spirit and the letter of the law. [Deuteronomy 25:1-2](#) says only a man found guilty can be beaten, and Paul had not yet been found guilty of anything.

ii. **God will strike you:** “Paul’s words, however, were more prophetic than he realized. Ananias’ final days — despite all his

scheming and bribes — were lived as a hunted animal and ended at the hands of his own people.”

c. **Those who stood by said, “Do you revile God’s high priest?”** Paul instantly knew that he was wrong in his outburst, no matter how he said it. He agreed that it was wrong to **speak evil of the ruler of your people** ([Exodus 22:28](#)). Yet Paul excused himself, claiming that he **did not know** that the man who commanded the punch was Ananias, the high priest.

i. This isn’t unreasonable, since Paul had been away from the council and the high circles of Jewish authority in Jerusalem for more than 20 years. Probably, he simply didn’t recognize the man who gave the command to strike him as the high priest. However, some think he **did not know** because Paul’s eyesight was bad. This is an inference from [Galatians 4:14-15](#) and [6:11](#), as well as from early written church traditions.

ii. Others think that Paul was sarcastic, with the idea “I didn’t think that anyone who acted in such a manner *could* be the high priest.”

3. ([Acts 23:6](#)) Paul’s clever ploy.

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!”

a. **Paul perceived:** Paul seems to have read his audience and saw they were not conducive to the gospel — the actions of the high priest and the attitudes of those present made this plain. So, Paul gave up on preaching the gospel, and did what he could to preserve his liberty before a council that wanted to kill him.

b. **One part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees:** Paul’s course was to divide the Sanhedrin among their party lines — to make one side (the **Pharisees**) sympathetic to him, instead of having them united against him.

c. **I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee:** Knowing his audience, Paul referred to his heritage as a Pharisee, and declared, **“concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged.”** He knew this was a matter of great controversy between the two parties.

i. Of course, this was an essentially true claim. The center of Paul’s gospel was a resurrected Jesus. He was **being judged** over the matter of the **resurrection of the dead**.

4. (Acts 23:7-9) The council is divided.

And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection; and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. 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."

a. **When he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided:**

Paul picked the right issue. Framed in these terms, he immediately gained the Pharisees as an ally, and he let *them* argue it out with the Sadducees.

i. **Sadducees** were the theological liberals of their day and denied the reality of life after death and the concept of resurrection. Luke rightly wrote of them, **Sadducees say that there is no resurrection; and no angel or spirit.**

ii. The **Pharisees** were more likely to find some ground of agreement with Paul, being the more the Bible believers in the Jewish world of that time. They took the Bible seriously, even if they

did err greatly by *adding* the traditions of men to what they received in the Bible.

iii. Usually the **Sadducees** and the **Pharisees** were bitter enemies, but they were able to unite in opposition against Jesus ([Matthew 16:1](#), [John 11:47-53](#)) and Paul. It's strange how people with nothing in common will come together as friends to oppose God or His work.

b. **Let us not fight against God:** In saying this, the Pharisees recommended a return to advice of their great leader Gamaliel as recorded in [Acts 5:38-39](#).

5. ([Acts 23:10](#)) Paul is rescued by the Roman commander.

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.

a. **Now when there arose a great dissension:** The commander had to be certain that these Jews were crazy in their endless and violent disputes. Previously, they rioted over the one word "*Gentiles*," now the distinguished men of the council fought over the one word "*resurrection*."

b. **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:** The commander removed Paul for his own safety, and left him in custody in the barracks.

i. Paul's clever ploy rescued him from the council, but he could not have been happy with the result. He had the opportunity to preach to a huge crowd of attentive Jews on the temple mount and it ended in failure. Then he had the opportunity to preach to the influential Jewish council, and it also ended in a fistfight.

ii. Later Paul seemed to suggest that this tactic of bringing up the resurrection controversy in the way that he did *was not* good. He suggests that it was "wrongdoing" on his part ([Acts 24:20-21](#)).

6. ([Acts 23:11](#)) Jesus comforts Paul in the night.

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."

a. **But the following night:** This must have been a difficult night for Paul. His heart longed for the salvation of his fellow Jews ([Romans 9:1-4](#)), and two great opportunities came to nothing. It would be no

surprise if Paul blamed himself for the missed opportunity before the Sanhedrin. It could be said that his reaction to the punch commanded by the High Priest spoiled everything.

i. Perhaps with tears, Paul mourned these lost opportunities for God and how he might have spoiled them. At moments like these, one is often tormented with a deep sense of unworthiness and un-useableness before God. Perhaps this was his end of ministry.

ii. “Bold, courageous, fearless during the day, the night of loneliness finds the strength spent, and the enemy is never slow to take advantage of that fact.”

iii. It was in the darkness of that night when the fears came upon Paul; when his trust in God seemed to falter; when he worried about what God was going to do and if he was going to make it. It was in the darkness of that night that Jesus came to Paul and **stood by him.**

b. **But... the Lord stood by him:** Jesus’ physical presence (as it seems was the case) with Paul was a unique manifestation. But Jesus promised every believer to always be with them ([Matthew 28:20](#)).

i. Jesus knew where Paul was; He had not lost sight of Paul because he was in jail. When John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, was in jail, a man visited him and said, "Friend, the Lord sent me to you, and I have been looking in half the prisons in England for you." John Bunyan replied, "I don't think the Lord sent you to me, because if He had, you would have come here first. God knows I have been here for years." God knows where you are today; even if you are hiding it from everyone else, God knows where you are.

ii. Paul was alone, but he wasn't alone; if everyone else forsook him, Jesus was enough. Better to be in jail with the Lord than to be in heaven without him.

iii. Paul had been miraculously delivered from jail cells before; but this time, the Lord met him right in the jail cell. We often demand that Jesus deliver us *out* of our circumstances, when He wants to meet us right *in* them. We sometimes think we are surrendering to Jesus when we are really only demanding an escape. God wants to meet us *in* whatever we face at the moment.

c. **Be of good cheer, Paul:** Jesus was not only with Paul; He gave him words of comfort. The words **be of good cheer** tell us that the

night brought with it an emotional and perhaps spiritual darkness upon Paul. Jesus was there to **cheer** His faithful servant after he had spent himself for Jesus' sake.

i. Jesus would not have said **be of good cheer** unless

Paul *needed* to hear those words. Paul knew his situation was bad, but he didn't know the half of it! The next day, forty Jewish assassins would gather together and vow to go on a hunger strike until they murdered Paul. Paul didn't know this would happen, but Jesus did. Yet He still could say to Paul, **be of good cheer**.

ii. You might think that things are bad right now, but you may not even know the half of it. But Jesus knows, and he still says to you, **be of good cheer**. Why? Not because everything is fine; but because God is still on His throne, and He still holds to His promise that *all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose* (Romans 8:28).

iii. Anyone can **be of good cheer** when everything is great; but the Christian can **be of good cheer** when everything is rotten, knowing that God is mighty and wonderful no matter what the crisis of the moment.

iv. **Be of good cheer** is only one word in the ancient Greek, and is used five times in the New Testament — each time by Jesus.

- Jesus told the bedridden paralytic, *Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you* ([Matthew 9:2](#)).
- Jesus told the woman with the 12-year bleeding problem, *Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well* ([Matthew 9:22](#)).
- Jesus told His frightened disciples on the Sea of Galilee, *Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid* ([Matthew 14:27](#)).
- Jesus told His disciples the night before His crucifixion, *In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world* ([John 16:33](#)).
- And here, in [Acts 23:11](#) — Jesus told Paul, **be of good cheer**.

d. **For as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome:** Jesus remembered what Paul *had* done in Jerusalem and told Paul that there *remained more* work for him to do in Rome.

i. Paul could have been discouraged about the lack of results from the sermon in Jerusalem. But the results were not his responsibility.

His responsibility was to bring the Word of God and to testify of Jesus; the results were God's responsibility. **You have testified for Me in Jerusalem** means that Jesus complimented Paul on a job well done.

ii. Yet, though Paul had done a good job, there was more to do. **So you must also bear witness at Rome** was Paul's next assignment.

The greatest words a faithful child of God can hear are "There is more for you to do." Those words grieve the lazy servant but bring joy to a faithful servant.

iii. It can be said to every child of God: *There is more for you to do.* More people to bring to Christ, more ways for you to glorify Him, more people to pray with, more humble ways to serve His people, more hungry to feed, more naked to clothe, more weary saints for you to encourage.

iv. "A divine decree ordains for you greater and more trying service than as yet you have seen. A future awaits you, and no power on the earth or under the earth can rob you of it; therefore be of good cheer."

e. **So you must also bear witness at Rome:** The promise of more work to do was also a promise of continued protection. Paul had to live until he had finished the course God had appointed for him.

i. Paul really *wanted* to go on to Rome ([Acts 19:21](#) and [Romans 1:9-12](#)). Sometimes we think that just because we *want* something a lot, it couldn't be God's will for us. But God often gives us the desires of our hearts ([Psalm 37:4](#)).

ii. The *timing* of this promise was especially precious. It didn't look like Paul would get out of Jerusalem alive; much less make it to Rome. God not only knows what we need to hear; He knows *when* we need to hear it.

iii. Paul faced his enemies the next day with a smile, knowing that they were powerless against him, *because God had more for him to do!*

iv. "This assurance meant much to Paul during the delays and anxieties of the next two years and goes far to account for the calm and dignified bearing which from now on marks him out as a master of events rather than their victim."

B. Paul is delivered from the plot of assassins.

1. ([Acts 23:12-15](#)) Forty men vow to set an ambush and kill Paul.

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. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, “We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul. 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 inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near.”

a. Saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed

Paul: In the days of Paul and Jesus, there was a secretive group of Jewish assassins who targeted the Romans and their supporters.

They were dagger-men, because they often concealed daggers and stabbed Roman soldiers as they walked by. It seems that these same kind of assassins now targeted Paul.

- i. They were so zealous that they made a vow to not eat or even drink until Paul was dead. This was a high level of commitment.

ii. These men lacked nothing in *commitment* or *zeal*. But their zeal was *not according to knowledge* (Romans 10:2). Zeal and devotion by themselves never prove that someone is right with God.

b. **Suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him:** The assassins wanted **the chief priests and elders** to lie to the Roman commander, pretended they wanted another meeting with Paul.

i. Their lie was a sin; and men who should have been committed to the law of God were instead happy to sin against Him. They were zealous, but still willing to lie and sin to accomplish their supposedly godly goals.

2. (Acts 23:16-22) Paul's nephew learns of the plot and warns the Roman commander.

So, when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. 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." 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.” Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside and asked privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?” 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. 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.” So, the commander let the young man depart, and commanded *him*, “Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me.”

a. **When Paul’s sister’s son heard of their ambush:** It was no accident that this happened. God had to protect Paul because Jesus promised that he would go to Rome to testify of Him ([Acts 23:11](#)).

b. **Paul the prisoner:** Paul had committed no crime; yet he was a prisoner. Because the Roman commander suspected he might be a revolutionary of some kind, Paul had to be kept in custody until the facts of the case could be discovered.

3. ([Acts 23:23-24](#)) Paul escapes to Caesarea, with a full military escort and a letter referring his case to the provincial governor.

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; and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring *him* safely to Felix the governor.”

a. **Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen:** 470 trained Roman soldiers would escort Paul out of Jerusalem. It was as if God wanted to exaggerate His faithfulness to Paul and show him beyond any doubt that the promise of Jesus was true.

b. **Provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor:** Not only did Paul escape Jerusalem alive, he did so riding a horse — actually, *several mounts* were made available to Paul.

4. (Acts 23:25-30) The letter from Lysias to Felix.

He wrote a letter in the following manner:

Claudius Lysias,

To the most excellent governor Felix:

Greetings.

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. And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains. 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.

a. **I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman:** In his letter, Lysias implied that he learned of Paul's Roman citizenship right away, and he said nothing of the way Paul was bound twice and almost scourged for the sake of interrogation.

b. **Had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains:**

For Luke, this was the important line in the letter. It is possible that Roman officials reviewed the Book of Acts before Paul's trial before Caesar. Here, Luke showed that other Roman officials had judged Paul "not guilty."

i. "One of Luke's prime motives in writing his twofold history is to demonstrate that there is no substance in this charge of subversion

brought not only against Paul but against Christians in general — that competent and impartial judges had repeatedly confirmed the innocence of the Christian movement and the Christian missionaries in respect of Roman law.”

5. (Acts 23:31-33) Paul arrives in Caesarea.

Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought *him* by night to Antipatris. The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him and returned to the barracks. When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him.

a. **Took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris:** The 200 soldiers only went as far as Antipatris because the most dangerous part of the road was only up to this point.

i. “Up to Antipatris [about 25 miles] the country was dangerous and inhabited by Jews; after that the country was open and flat, quite unsuited for any ambush and largely inhabited by Gentiles.”

b. **They also presented Paul to him:** Paul made it out of Jerusalem and to Caesarea on the coast. The plot of the 40 assassins failed.

i. Some wonder if the men who made the vow of fasting died because they failed in their mission to kill Paul. This was probably not the case. Ancient rabbis allowed for four types of vows to be broken: “Vows of incitement, vows of exaggeration, vows made in error, and vows that cannot be fulfilled by reason of constraint” — exclusions allowing for almost any contingency.

6. (Acts 23:34-35) Paul awaits trial in Caesarea.

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

a. **When he understood that he was from Cilicia:** Perhaps Felix hoped that Paul came from someplace that required that someone else hear his case. Apparently, learning that **he was from Cilicia** meant that Felix would indeed be responsible to hear and rule on his case.

b. **I will hear you when your accusers also have come:** This would be Paul’s first opportunity to speak to someone at this level of authority (**the governor**). This was the beginning of the fulfillment of

the promise made to Paul some 20 years earlier: that he would bear the name of Jesus to kings ([Acts 9:15](#)).

c. **And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium:** This began a two-year period of confinement for Paul in Caesarea. After that he spent at least two years in Rome. Taken together with travel time, the next five years of Paul's life were lived in Roman custody. This was a striking contrast to his previous years of wide and spontaneous travel.

i. Paul lived many years with great freedom and had to trust the promises of God through those years. Yet he also had to trust the promises of Jesus in his years of little freedom — and to know that God could work just as powerfully through those more difficult circumstances.

ii. Paul needed to receive the promise of Jesus — both promises from 20 years before and promises recently made — to receive them with confident faith, allowing those promises to make a difference in how he thought and even felt. Every believer must do the same.