

22:30 But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them.

23:1 Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day."

23:2 The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth.

In the previous chapter the commander of the Romans had tried to find out why the mob was hostile to Paul by asking them, but he had received mixed responses. He then thought he could extract the truth from Paul by torture, but Paul's Roman citizenship prevented it. Therefore, he decided to turn Paul over to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body, to find out what the issues were.

The God of Israel was the true God; the Jews were the ones who had received the Scriptures. They were the nation into which Messiah was born; however, the council had already rejected Christ and Stephen. With Paul they were now offered one last chance to respond. Thus, the crucial question was what would they do with Messiah's chosen vessel, the apostle Paul?

The answer is clear by the action of the High Priest. They reject the gospel for the last time.

It is hard to comprehend what Paul had said that would deserve being struck, but Stott's suggestion makes sense. He says that the offense was in that Paul was still professing to live before God with a good conscience as a Christian. To Ananias this sounded as blasphemous as it could get; however, ordering Paul to be struck is surprising for someone who was supposed to be a responsible official.

23:3 Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?"

23:4 But the bystanders said, "Do you revile God's high priest?"

23:5 And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.'"

Paul's harsh response to the High Priest has caused a lot of speculation among commentators, especially because Paul had written to the Corinthians telling them, "when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate" (1 Cor. 4:12-13). The crowd was shocked that Paul would curse the High Priest whom they believed to be appointed by God (Jn. 18:22). In verse 5 Paul seems to apologize (though some see it as sarcasm; i.e. "I was not aware that a man like you could be a High Priest!" - Marshall, 284). Paul's response could also be a result of his poor vision (Gal. 4:13-16; 6:11), or there may have been numerous voices in the court so Paul did not know who had given the order to have him struck (Stott). Furthermore, we do not know how Ananias was dressed; he may not have been wearing the typical garb that he would wear on other occasions.

Historically, Ananias experienced a violent death when he was assassinated in 66AD by Jewish guerillas who saw him as a Roman sympathizer (Marshall, 382). Some Christians, no doubt, understood this as a fulfillment of Paul's words, "God is going to strike you."

23:6 But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!"

23:7 As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.

23:8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.

23:9 And there occurred a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"

23:10 And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.

Paul sided with the Pharisees theologically; the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection, predestination, the existence of angels, and other doctrines. Paul's comments stirred up the crowd, but what was Paul's motivation for doing this? Of course, we have no answer, but perhaps his belief in the resurrection of the dead (particularly the resurrection of Christ) would provide common ground with those present and put him back in the favor of some after his response to the High Priest.

The debate became so heated that the commander had to intervene once again, for he feared that they would kill Paul.

23:11 But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."

With the events that had transpired after returning to Jerusalem, Paul must have had little hope that he would make it to Rome. Previously, Paul had acknowledged that he wanted to go to Rome (Acts 19:21), but there was no sign that God would send him there. At this point of time, he may have even concluded his end was near. However, in the midst of his anxiety, Jesus appeared to him in a vision and told him he would go to Rome. This personal appearance of Christ must have helped him immensely for there were three more trials he had to face, as well as two years in prison and a hazardous journey to Rome.

It is also significant to note that Paul's appearances to the Sanhedrin and to Rome are described as a witness. Christ intended for Paul to testify of Him through his trials.

23:12 *When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul.*

23:13 *There were more than forty who formed this plot.*

23:14 *They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul.*

23:15 *"Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near the place."*

23:16 *But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul.*

23:17 *Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him."*

23:18 *So he took him and led him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you."*

23:19 *The commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, began to inquire of him privately, "What is it that you have to report to me?"*

23:20 *And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him.*

23:21 *"So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you."*

23:22 *So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, "Tell no one that you have notified me of these things."*

The Jews in the temple had failed to lynch Paul, and the Sanhedrin had failed to convict him of any crime so a group of Jews hatched a plan to murder him. Part of the plan involved getting the Sanhedrin to cooperate with them by asking the Roman commander to send Paul back to them to be examined once more. While Paul was on the way, the Jews would grab him and kill him. By taking a vow to kill Paul, they put themselves under a divine curse should they fail to accomplish their goal; they evidently did not think very clearly about the consequences of their vow.

The devices of men cannot alter the plan of God. This time God intervened through Paul's nephew who overheard the plot and told it to the commander who then immediately took action to have Paul moved.

23:23 *And he called to him two of the centurions and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen."*

23:24 *They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor.*

23:25 *And he wrote a letter having this form:*

23:26 *"Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings.*

23:27 "When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman.

23:28 "And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council;

23:29 and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment.

23:30 "When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you."

23:31 So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris.

23:32 But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks.

23:33 When these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him.

23:34 When he had read it, he asked from what province he was, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia,

23:35 he said, "I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also," giving orders for him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.

The provision made by the commander to move Paul seems like overkill. Were 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen really necessary to insure Paul's safe travels? The large number emphasizes the extent of the care of God – He provides protection abundantly more than needed to bring His servant to the destination He desires for him to be.

Paul was to be moved to Caesarea (about 37 mi. [60 km] away) where Felix was ruling as governor. Due to the length of the journey and the shortness of time mentioned, Marshall suggests that the foot soldiers returned to Jerusalem after reaching Antipatris (about 25 miles from Jerusalem), leaving the mounted party to accompany Paul the rest of the way (Marshall, 392). This would allow them to travel more quickly.

According to Luke, the Romans rescued Paul four times (Acts 21:32-33; 22:23-24; 23:10; 23:23 ff.), and three times declared he was innocent.

One cannot help but admire Paul's courage. He was willing to face an angry mob and speak the truth with confidence.