



Book of Acts

Chapter 23

Theme: Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin

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McGee Introduction: Paul is now a prisoner, and we will follow his life as a prisoner. From this point on we find Paul giving a defense of himself and his ministry. He will appear before several rulers. Because the Jews are plotting his death, he will be taken down to Caesarea. He will spend about two years there in prison before he finally appeals and is sent to Rome.

You recall we have mentioned that there has always been some controversy, some difference of opinion, as to whether or not Paul should have gone to Jerusalem. Was he in the will of God when he did this? I contend that he was entirely in the will of God. I think that as we move on we will find again and again that Paul is in the will of God. It is true that he has been arrested, and it is true that he is having a rough time, but that does not mean that he is not in God's will.

As we go along we can see the hand of God in the life of this man. The same One who moved in the life of Paul wants to move in your life and in my life today. That is the glory and wonder of it all, friend. Right down here where you and I walk in a commonplace way, God is moving in our lives. In one way we are living a very humble existence and many of us today have a very simple, routine life. Yet God is concerned and interested in us. God wants to give us that leading and guiding that you and I need for today in the complexity that faces us in our contemporary culture. Believe me, we need that help today. There is no question that we need God on the scene.

A great many people go to the extremes today. They are trying to have some great emotional or revolutionary experience such as Paul had. I don't think that we need to do that. As a matter of fact, I doubt that you or I will have some great experience. It is by simple faith that one comes to Christ. We are to trust Him and to walk with Him. He will give the leading, the guidance, and direction in our everyday lives.

We have seen how the Roman captain arrested Paul and put him in prison and was going to beat him. He refrained from doing that when he learned that Paul was a Roman citizen. He was amazed to find that Paul was a Jew who could speak Greek and was a Roman citizen. Paul was a highly educated, cosmopolitan gentleman.

Now the Sanhedrin, composed of the religious rulers, wants to try him. Paul makes a futile attempt here to explain his position and his conduct to the Sanhedrin. The Lord encourages Paul. Then we see that the plot to murder Paul leads to his transfer to Caesarea for trial before Felix. This is a remarkable section and a very thrilling account of the experiences of Paul as a prisoner for Jesus Christ.¹

“Paul endured many persecutions as he approached the time of his martyrdom; there are a number of notable parallels between his life and the Savior's. Like the Savior, Paul was smitten by the Jews with the high priest present ("John 18:22John 18:22; "Acts 23:2Acts 23:2). Like the Christ, Paul was arraigned before both Jewish and Roman tribunals; both the Savior and his apostle were arraigned three times before Roman rulers as the Jews sought the death sentence their own jurisdictions could not provide. The absence of credible witnesses against them during their trials showed both Christ and Paul to have

¹McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:613). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

been falsely accused ("Mark 14:55"Mark 14:56Mark 14:55-56; "Acts 25:7Acts 25:7). And, like Pilate, Agrippa was 'almost persuaded' ("Acts 26:28Acts 26:28) and would have freed Paul had it not been for the Jews and his consideration of Caesar ("John 19:12John 19:12; "Acts 26:32Acts 26:32). Although Paul was not crucified, he was stoned and left for dead outside the city. Like Christ, who was slain outside the city gate and, though placed in a tomb, did not see corruption ("Ps. 16:10Psalm 16:10), Paul also arose and continued his ministry ("Acts 14:19"Acts 14:20Acts 14:19-20).

“For thirty years following Paul's conversion, the Savior repeatedly showed him the ‘great things he must suffer for [Christ's] name's sake’ ("Acts 9:16Acts 9:16). Paul's sufferings as a minister of Christ were varied, protracted, and intense ("2 Cor. 11:23"2 Cor. 11:24"2 Cor. 11:25"2 Cor. 11:26"2 Cor. 11:27"2 Cor. 11:28"2 Cor. 11:29"2 Corinthians 11:23-29), yet he endured, even unto martyrdom. His motto was ever, ‘I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us’ ("Rom. 8:18Romans 8:18).” (Michael W. Middleton, *The Apostle Paul, His Life and His Testimony: The 23d Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1994], 127.)²

Acts 23:1

And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men *and* brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.

Gentile officers were never permitted to participate in the deliberations of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Lysias had been appointed by Caesar and was responsible for the protection of any person who claimed to be a citizen of Rome. Therefore, he commanded the Jewish rulers to appear before him where he could not be excluded.

[brethren] = offensive to them.

Fifth time there is a defense of Christ to the Sanhedrin.

[lived] Greek: *politeuomai* (GSN-4176), to live as a citizen; be a good citizen and obey all the laws. Only here and Phil. 1:27. He means to say that all his life as a Jew and as a Christian he had been sincere, honest and unhypocritical. He now had a clear conscience in being a true Christian. Paul pleaded conscience as his guide when killing the saints, proving that conscience is not always a good guide. It can be seared and in that state is not normal (1 Tim. 4:1-2). It can not be a right rule unless enlightened and kept normal. In ignorance it can burn saints at the stake.

² <http://www.gospeldoctrine.com/NewTestament/ntindex.html>

BBC: Paul's claim here (cf. also Acts 24:16) may suggest that even when he was persecuting Christians, he was doing what he thought was right rather than knowingly opposing the truth (Phil. 3:6). Whenever the accused could claim to have lived his life previously free of reproach, it counted in his favor rhetorically.³

JNTC: Sha'ul looked straight at them and probably recognized many familiar faces in the *Sanhedrin*, since he may well have once been a member himself (26:10&N). In any case, it is clear from vv. 6–10 that he understood his audience.

Brothers. These people are still Sha'ul's brothers (compare 22:1&N). However, this is not a formal meeting of the *Sanhedrin*, for "Brothers" is not a mode of address appropriate for a court in regular session (rather, it is appropriate for old friends; see above paragraph). Instead, this is the gathering summoned by the Roman commander (22:30). In no other *Sanhedrin* session does the person being questioned commence the proceedings with a speech of his own (compare 4:5–22, 5:21–40, 6:12–7:60 Lk 22:66–71). Also, in a formal session the identity of the *cohen hagadol* would have been clear to Sha'ul (vv. 2–5; but see note there).⁴

Paul was not trying to say 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.

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." (Bruce)

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.*

Acts 23:2

And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth.

Ananias reference check (re: Josephus). Glutton, tyrant, bigot and murderer. He defrauded impoverished priests of tithes and sent paid servants to the threshing floors to steal corn Any who resisted were bludgeoned to death.

The Talmud speaks of unpardonable conduct when what remained of the sacrifices was completely devoured so that nothing remained for the hungry priests.

Eventually sent by Quadratus, the governor of Syria, to answer for his deeds before Caesar. Apparently, the emperor gave his support to the priests, who returned to resume his work in Jerusalem. Traitor to his own nation and puppet of the Romans.

³ Bible Background Commentary: New Testament

⁴ Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 23:1). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

BBC: Ananias was high priest A.D. 47-52 and about 53-59. Thus Paul here meets Ananias shortly before Agrippa II would remove him (see comment on "Acts 24:27). Ananias was a Roman vassal, known for his greed and for stealing the tithes belonging to the poorer priests. The Zealot revolutionaries killed him in A.D. 66, about eight years after this hearing. Jewish law forbade condemnation before the accused was proved guilty. A "whitewashed wall" was one whose weakness or ugliness might be concealed—but not changed—by a veneer of whitewash: an appropriate condemnation of Israel's leaders (Ezekiel 13:10-11). Walls facing the street in the eastern Mediterranean were often whitewashed.

LAN: Josephus, a respected first-century historian, described Ananias as profane, greedy, and hot-tempered. Paul's outburst came as a result of the illegal command that Ananias had given. Ananias had violated Jewish law by assuming that Paul was guilty without a trial and ordering his punishment (see Deut. 19:15). Paul didn't recognize Ananias as the high priest, probably because Ananias's command broke the law he was pledged to represent. As Christians, we are to represent Christ. When those around us say, "I didn't know you were a Christian," we have failed to represent him as we should. We are not merely Christ's followers; we are his representatives to others.⁵

BKC: The setting for this brief trial is given here. After Paul claimed all good conscience in his ministry (cf. 24:16; 1 Cor. 4:4), the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Ananias' response is in keeping with what is known about him from Josephus, who described him as insolent, hot-tempered, profane, and greedy. Ironically, at the beginning of Paul's ministry another Ananias helped him receive his sight.⁶

However, Paul's declaration he had **lived in all good conscience before God until this day** drew the wrath of the high priest. He was offended that someone accused of such serious crimes could claim a clear conscience.

Or, perhaps, he was convicted in his heart by the inherent integrity of Paul's claim.

Acts 23:3

Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, *thou* whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?

[whited wall] - calling him a grave.

"Barefaced hypocrite": Prophecy fulfilled as according to Josephus. Ananias later dragged from a sewer in which he was hiding and killed by an assassin's dagger.

⁵ Life Application bible Notes
cf. *confer*, compare

⁶Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:419). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Paul's lack of recognition of High Priest:

- 1) Poor eyesight? "Thorn in the flesh"?
- 2) Uncertain identity at the time: Ananias, dismissed from office, had been to Rome to answer charges made against him and only recently returned to Jerusalem. Paul had been away for several years and would not have known the ruling high priest.
- 3) Not being a properly convened assembly of the national council, hurriedly arranged in response to Lysias; therefore, high priest probably not wearing robes of office.

[smite thee] The 13th New Testament prophecy in Acts (Acts 23:3, fulfilled five years later. In a tumult caused by his own son, he was caught hiding in an aqueduct and murdered; Josephus, Antiquities 20:10,9). The next prophecy is in Acts 23:11.

[whited] Greek: *koniao* (GSN-2867), whitewashed (Matthew 23:27).

[for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law? ...Revilest thou God's high priest?] These are questions 67-68. In the book of Acts, the next question is in Acts 23:19.

Clarke: God shall smite thee, thou whited wall—Thou hypocrite! who sittest on the seat of judgment, pretending to hear and seriously weigh the defense of an accused person, who must in justice and equity be presumed to be innocent till he is proved to be guilty; and, instead of acting according to the law, commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law, which always has the person of the prisoner under its protection; nor ever suffers any penalty to be inflicted but what is prescribed as the just punishment for the offense. As if he had said: "Thinkest thou that God will suffer such an insult on his laws, on justice, and on humanity, to pass unpunished?"⁷

McGee: Under Roman law no man was to be punished until judgment had been handed in. Just because a man is arrested and accused of a certain crime does not grant liberty to those who had arrested him to abuse him. In that day the Roman law actually granted a great deal of justice. However, this incident and the trial of Jesus make us recognize that even the Roman law could be twisted and turned. Justice is dependent upon the one who is executing the law.

In our day there are a great many people who feel that if we change our form of government, or at least if we change our party from the one that is in power—whichever it may be—this will give us a solution to all our problems. It has never solved our problems in the past. The men who began our system of government had a great consciousness of God. Although a man like Thomas Jefferson was a deist and could not be called a born-again believer, he had a conviction that the Bible was the Word of God and he respected it. We don't find that in our leadership today, and yet we wonder why the system won't work. We think we need to change the system. Do you know what we need? We need to change men's hearts. It is man that needs changing, not the system.

⁷ Adam Clarke's Commentary on the New Testament

The high priest orders Paul smitten on the mouth, and Paul speaks out against him very strongly. This should dispel the idea that Paul was some sort of pantywaist. The concept that humility makes a person a sort of Mr. Milquetoast is all wrong. Actually, humility and meekness mean that you submit yourself to the will of God, regardless of the cost. Paul is a meek man and a humble man, but he is not about to take injustice lying down. He calls this man a whited wall. “While you are judging me according to the Mosaic Law, you are breaking the Law yourself.” That reveals that Paul also knew the Law. A man cannot be condemned or punished before judgment has been handed down.⁸

God shall smite thee—as indeed He did; for he was killed by an assassin during the Jewish war [JOSEPHUS, *Wars of the Jews*, 2.17.9].

thou whited wall—that is, hypocrite (Mt 23:27). This epithet, however correctly describing the man, must not be defended as addressed to a judge, though the remonstrance which follows—“for sittest thou,” &c.—ought to have put him to shame.⁹

whitewashed wall: Whitewash is a thin paint used to make something dirty look clean. Ananias deserved this rebuke. The fact that Ananias had someone else “do his dirty work” did not absolve him from the ordering of the act.

Spurgeon: Paul's temper was roused by the unjust conduct of the high priest. His prophecy was fearfully fulfilled: almost at the commencement of the siege of Jerusalem Ananias fell by the daggers of his enemies. We cannot help noting the difference between the meek silence of Jesus, and the indignant reply of Paul.

ESV: Paul, like Jesus, used the metaphor of whitewash for hypocrisy (see Matt. 23:27). Ananias was a particularly bad high priest. For the illegality of Ananias's action, see Lev. 19:15.

The high priest indeed was a **whitewashed wall**; a white veneer of purity covering over obvious corruption. The high priest was also not only to be the administrator of the law, but the example of it. His 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 been found guilty of nothing.

Acts 23:4

And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest?

Paul's thorn in the flesh, may have been problem with eyesight from his experience with the bright light on the Damascus Road. Cf. Gal 4:15; 6:11; “thorn in the flesh” 2 Cor 12:7

⁸McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:614). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁹Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Ac 23:3). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

McGee: Paul didn't know this man was the high priest. Certainly he would recognize the high priest on sight. Before his conversion he had been a Pharisee in Jerusalem. I think this is another evidence that Paul had an eye disease and didn't see too well. As we go in the Epistles, we will find other statements which indicate that Paul had trouble with his vision.

Acts 23:5

Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.

Quotes Ex 27:28.

[**said Paul ...**] In his first address (Acts 22:1-21), Paul made it clear that he was a Jew with the regular Jewish education. He emphasized that he had all the prejudices of the Jew and had given full proof of this in that he was chief in persecution of Christians. He related his experiences with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and in the temple, but this was rejected by his people. Had he been a Gentile, no matter how learned or eminent he was, his whole teaching would have been discounted as coming from prejudice and ignorance. But, being who he was, it was hard for them to discount what he said. God thus used one of the most eminent, learned, and bigoted Jews of that time to nullify the whole Jewish system and show the necessity of the gospel of Christ. Now, in his second address to his people he changed his strategy and appealed to the party spirit of the Jews. He knew they were divided in politics and religion into two major groups—the Pharisees and Sadducees. He, being a Pharisee, made his appeal to that group declaring that because of "the hope and resurrection of the dead" he was "called in question." This brought results, for the Pharisees took up his cause (Acts 23:6-10).

[**I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest**] Paul was ignorant of this man being the high priest. He really was not, for he had been deprived of this office by the Romans, and succeeded by Jonathan, after whose murder by Festus there occurred a period of vacancy in this office. During this vacancy Ananias usurped the office from which he had been expelled for his crimes. When Paul said that he was ignorant that he was the true high priest he was stating a fact sincerely; for, though his friends called him so, they could not invest him with the office (Josephus, Antiquities, 20:6). Paul no doubt thought that the person presiding was the sagan, or high priest's deputy, or some other person put in the seat for the moment.¹⁰

[**Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people**] Explaining that if he had known he was the high priest he would have shown reverence for the office (Exodus 22:28).

Clarke: I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest—After all the learned labor that has been spent on this subject, the simple meaning appears plainly to be this:—

¹⁰ Dake Study Notes, Dake's Study Bible

St. Paul did not know that Ananias was high priest; he had been long absent from Jerusalem; political changes were frequent; the high priesthood was no longer in succession, and was frequently bought and sold; the Romans put down one high priest, and raised up another, as political reasons dictated. As the person of Ananias might have been wholly unknown to him, as the hearing was very sudden, and there was scarcely any time to consult the formalities of justice, it seems very probable that St. Paul, if he ever had known the person of Ananias, had forgotten him; and as, in a council or meeting of this kind, the presence of the high priest was not indispensably necessary, he did not know that the person who presided was not the *sagan*, or high priest's deputy, or some other person put in the seat for the time being. I therefore understand the words above in their most obvious and literal sense. He knew not who the person was, and God's Spirit suddenly led him to denounce the Divine displeasure against him.

Clarke: Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people—If I had known he was the high priest, I should not have publicly pronounced this execration; for respect is due to his person for the sake of his office. I do not see that Paul intimates that he had done any thing through inadvertence; nor does he here confess any fault; he states two facts:—

1. That he did not know him to be the high priest.
2. That such a one, or any ruler of the people, should be revered. But he neither recalled or made an apology for his words: he had not committed a trespass, and he did not acknowledge one. We must beware how we attribute either to him in the case before us.

Barnes: For it is written. Exodus 22:28. Paul adduces this to show that it was his purpose to observe the law; that he would not intentionally violate it; and that, if he had known Ananias to be high priest, he would have been restrained by his regard for the law from using the language which he did.¹¹

Barnes: Of the ruler of thy people. This passage had not any peculiar reference to the high priest, but it inculcated the general spirit of respect for those in office, whatever that office was. As the office of high priest was one of importance and authority, Paul declares here that he would not be guilty of showing disrespect for it, or of using reproachful language towards it. (*) "wist" "knew" (*) "written" Exodus 22:28, Ecclesiastes 10:20, 2 Peter 2:10, Jude 1:8

BBC: The high priest normally sat in a special place and wore distinctive robes; either he does not do so here because the gathering is informal, or Paul answers ironically, because of the official's corruption and improper claim to power. Socrates and others had endeavored to show themselves more pious in the matter concerning which they were accused than their judges were, which naturally led to condemnation by an angry court. Paul is content to show his piety by citing Scripture.

McGee: Paul knew the Law. He knew every detail of it. He knew that the Law said that rulers were to be respected.

¹¹ Barnes' Notes on the New Testament

This is something else that we have forgotten today. I personally believe that the president of the United States, regardless of who he is or how bad he is, ought never to be made a subject of a cartoon. He should not be ridiculed because of the position he holds. We should respect the office. We as human beings need to respect authority. Paul wrote; “Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour” (Rom. 13:7). It is interesting that he wrote this at a time when Nero was on the throne in Rome, and Nero was a madman.

BKC: Paul’s outburst was triggered by the high priest’s illegal command. How could the priest violate the Law while sitting as judge over one who supposedly had transgressed the Law? Jewish law presumed the accused to be innocent until proven guilty. Like a whitewashed wall, Ananias looked all right on the outside but was weak and deteriorating inwardly. Jesus too in His trials was struck on the mouth and challenged the legality of it (John 18:20-23).

JNTC: Sha’ul’s outburst is certainly not the behavior of a man who had heard and understood Yeshua’s command to turn the other cheek (Mt 5:39). Yeshua himself, when struck, argued the injustice of it without vexation or irritation (Yn 18:22). But no claim of perfection is made for Sha’ul. Like the heroes of the *Tanakh*, whose failings are reported faithfully along with their victories, he is shown to be a man who has not yet achieved the goal, as he himself admits (Pp 3:12–13, 1C 9:25–27). God saves imperfect people.

I didn’t know, brothers, that he was the *cohen hagadol*. It has been suggested that this line drips sarcasm, that Sha’ul knew perfectly well who the *cohen hagadol* was but means that he wasn’t acting like one!¹²

Note that Paul did not defend his behavior (v. 3), but rather repented of it. **I did not know:** There are several possible reasons why Paul did not know Ananias was the high priest. It could be that Paul’s eyesight was poor, and he could not see Ananias clearly. Or perhaps this was not a normal assembly of the Sanhedrin, and the high priest was not wearing his normal robes or sitting in his usual place.¹³

ESV: It is quite possible that Paul did not know the high priest, since he had been absent from Jerusalem for many years. Other options for understanding this verse include appeals to poor eyesight for Paul, or that he did not realize the act came at the high priest’s command.

However, Paul agreed that it was wrong to speak evil of the ruler of your people (Exodus 22:28), considering the office more than the man; but claims he did not know that Ananias was the high priest.

¹²Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 23:2). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

¹³ The Nelson Study Bible

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.

Others think that Paul is being sarcastic here, with the idea "I didn't think that anyone who acted in such a manner *could* be the high priest!"

Acts 23:6

But when Paul perceived that the 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: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question.

[perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee] Paul knowing he could not get justice, thought it best to split his persecutors and bring them at issue with each other. The Pharisees immediately took up his cause because they considered the Sadducees to be irreligious men. (Dake)

[resurrection of the dead] The whole Christian religion is built around Christ and His physical resurrection and without faith in both men are lost (Romans 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:1-23). (Dake)

BBC: The Sanhedrin sat in a semicircle, so most of the members of the court could see each other. Other sharp-witted Jewish strategists of this period, like Josephus not many years later (*Life* 139, 28), also practiced this method of "Divide and conquer." The hope of the resurrection was central to Judaism, and many martyrs had died staking their hope on it. Paul's views did not violate any central tenets of Pharisaism; he was now a "Pharisee plus," who taught that the resurrection had already been inaugurated in Jesus. Pharisees knew that no true Pharisee would have committed the crime with which Paul had been charged by the original crowd (Acts 21:28).

LAN: The Sadducees and Pharisees were two groups of religious leaders, but with strikingly different beliefs. The Pharisees believed in a bodily resurrection, but the Sadducees did not. The Sadducees adhered only to Genesis through Deuteronomy, which contain no explicit teaching on resurrection. Paul's words moved the debate away from himself and toward their festering controversy about the resurrection. The Jewish council was split.

Paul's sudden insight that the council was a mixture of Sadducees and Pharisees is an example of the power that Jesus promised to believers (Mark 13:9-11). God will help us when we are under fire for our faith. Like Paul, we should always be ready to present our testimony. The Holy Spirit will give us power to speak boldly.

McGee: We are getting more of Paul's background. His father had also been a Pharisee, probably a wealthy and influential man.

Paul uses the discord between two parties to further his own defense. The issue here is not the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is simply that the Pharisees believed in the

resurrection of the dead and had this hope, while the Sadducees did not. So Paul turns the trial into a theological argument between the “fundamentalists” and the “liberals.” That is easy to do. There never has been a time when you couldn’t get these two groups at each other’s throats! That is what Paul is doing here.

JNTC: On the *Tz. dukim* and *P. rushim* see Mt 3:7N.

I myself am a Parush (a Pharisee), Greek *egô Pharisaïos eimi*. “*Egô*” (“I”) adds emphasis (“I myself”), and the verb “*eimi*” is present tense (“am”). Though a Messianic Jew for some twenty years, Sha’ul still considers himself a Pharisee (compare Pp 3:5). This fact alone invalidates equating “Pharisee” with “legalist” or “hypocrite”; see 15:5&N, Mt 23:13–36N.

It is concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead that I am being tried. Compare Yeshua’s correction of the *Tz. dukim* on this point (Mt 22:23–32). A Pharisee could believe in Yeshua and his resurrection and remain a Pharisee like Sha’ul; Luke refers to other believing *P. rushim* at 15:5. But it is difficult to see how a Sadducee could remain a Sadducee after coming to faith in the risen Yeshua (see v. 8&N), and the New Testament makes no mention of believing Sadducees. It does mention believing *cohanim* (6:7&N), and some of these may well have been *Tz. dukim* before coming to faith.¹⁴

Paul was being tried before the Sanhedrin. He had few if any friends in this eminent body. It is not clear how Paul distinguished the Sadducees from the Pharisees. They may have sat separately, or some distinctive feature of dress may have identified one from the other. Whatever the difference, Paul legitimately capitalized upon this spirit of partisanship. This, in turn, made it possible for him to speak out on a basic doctrine of Christianity: the resurrection of the dead in general, and, specifically, Christ’s own resurrection in the drama of redemption. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Paul introduced the topic with tact. He knew that the Pharisees believed in resurrection, in spirits, and in angels. They were supernaturalists. The Sadducees believed in none of these things and were strict monists, believing in only the natural material order. Paul’s statement was a master stroke of God-given wisdom. The words “the hope and resurrection of the dead” put Paul in the position of being persecuted for promoting a basic tenet of the Pharisees. If anything would secure their sympathy even temporarily, this would. Paul had an advantage because he was not merely a first-generation Pharisee, but apparently he descended from generations of them. Thus, his assertion appealed to those who had accepted what he had said to hear him completely. However, a sharp dissension immediately broke out between the Pharisees and Sadducees, during which the commander had to rescue Paul (v. 10).¹⁵

Acts 23:7

And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided.

¹⁴Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 23:6). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

¹⁵ Believer’s Study Bible Notes

Clarke: And the multitude was divided— Paul, perceiving the assembly to consist of Sadducees and Pharisees, and finding he was not to expect any justice, thought it best thus to divide the council, by introducing a question on which the Pharisees and Sadducees were at issue. He did so; and the Pharisees immediately espoused his side of the question, because in opposition to the Sadducees, whom they abhorred, as irreligious men.

BBC: Pharisees and Sadducees were notorious for their disagreements, especially over the doctrine of the resurrection; Pharisees taught that Sadducees had no part in the world to come, because they did not believe in life after death (at least not in a form acceptable to most other Palestinian Jews).

Acts 23:8

For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.

[no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both] This expresses the sum of the religion of both the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Clarke: The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—It is strange, since these denied a future state, that they observed the ordinances of the law; for they also believed the five books of Moses to be a revelation from God: yet they had nothing in view but temporal good; and they understood the promises in the law as referring to these things alone. In order, therefore, to procure them, they watched, fasted, prayed, etc., and all this they did that they might obtain happiness in the present life. See the account of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Matthew 3:7; 16:1.

BBC: Some scholars contend that the Sadducees believed only in the five books of Moses; but even if this were the case, they must have believed in the angels that appeared in Genesis. Luke's parenthetical comment here probably refers to the Sadducees' denial of the developed angelology and demonology of the Pharisees (Acts 12:15 is not Pharisaic). The Sadducees did not believe in life after death.

JNTC: The *Tz'dukim* believed the human soul disappeared with the body; only God's Spirit remained. One hundred fifty years later belief in **resurrection** of the dead had become an essential ingredient of normative Judaism, for Mishna Sanhedrin 10:1 says: "These have no part in the *olam haba* [the world to come]: those who say the resurrection of the dead cannot be inferred from the *Torah*"

For more, see Mt 22:31–32N.

The existence of angels and spirits is an issue because of what Sha'ul said in his earlier address (22:6–11, 17–21; see v. 9. On angels, see 7:53&N; Ga 3:19&N; MJ 1:4–2:18&NN, 13:2b&N.

Acts 23:9

And there arose a great cry: and the scribes *that were* of the Pharisees' part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God.

[We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God] Paul now had on his side the Pharisees who were willing to go along with him if he had received a special revelation from God.

Clarke: The scribes—arose, and strove—*Διευμαχοντο*, They contended forcibly—they came to an open rupture with the Sadducees; and, in order to support their own party against them, they even admitted as truth, Paul's account of his miraculous conversion, and therefore they said, if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, etc. He had previously mentioned that Jesus Christ had appeared to him, when on his way to Damascus; and, though they might not be ready to admit the doctrine of Christ's resurrection, yet they could, consistently with their own principles, allow that the soul of Christ might appear to him; and they immediately caught at this, as furnishing a strong proof against the doctrine of the Sadducees, who neither believed in angel nor spirit, while the Pharisees confessed both.

BBC: From the Pharisaic standpoint, if Paul were being condemned for being consistent with his doctrine of the resurrection, then it is natural that the Sadducees want him convicted and likewise natural that the Pharisees and Sadducees should oppose each other on this matter. Later Pharisaic reports declare that the Sadducees would have no share in the world to come, because they did not believe in it.

BKC: In such a scene justice was impossible. Recognizing this, Paul changed his tactics completely and stated his hope in the resurrection of the dead along with the Pharisees (on this hope, cf. 24:15; 26:6-7; 28:20). This immediately disrupted the proceedings because it started an argument between the Pharisees and the Sadducees (cf. 4:1-2). By using this clever tactic, Paul divided his enemy. Amazingly the Pharisees defended Paul, a fellow Pharisee.

JNTC: What of it? Compare *Rabban* Gamli'el's similarly restrained reaction to the believers' claims (5:39).

Spurgeon: The apostle obeyed the injunction, "Be ye wise as serpents and harmless as doves." He saw how hopeless it was to plead his cause before so prejudiced an assembly, and therefore he raised another issue. He knew that the Pharisees and Sadducees hated each other even worse than they hated him; and, therefore, he cast in a spark upon their combustible materials, and set them in a blaze. The two parties left their victim, and turned their weapons against each other.

cf. *confer*, compare

Acts 23:10

And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them, and to bring *him* into the castle.

Last sermon Paul would preach in Jerusalem. Never again to set foot in the City of David. Third time the Romans rescue Paul..

BBC: Although Greek tragedy provides some parallels to the commander's fear for Paul (e.g., a story of two suitors who inadvertently killed their beloved by pulling on her), Greeks would most naturally read this account in the light of Greek *comedy*, laughing at the ludicrous character of the situation. Disputes in courtrooms chaired by high officials rarely came to blows.

McGee: This is the first time that Dr. Luke says there was "a great dissension." Knowing how he uses understatement, I am of the opinion this is the worst dissension recorded in the Book of Acts concerning any group. Paul's life is so in danger again that the Roman captain reaches in and saves him from the angry Sanhedrin. While I have defended Gallio's concept of the separation of church and state, the state is protecting the apostle Paul at this point, which is quite proper. So the chief captain rescues Paul again without learning the real nature of the hatred against Paul.

Acts 23:11

And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, **Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.**

Darkest night of Paul's life:

No prayer meeting (re: Peter's imprisonment, Acts 12).

"The Lord stood by him" judged in faithfulness, not by success.

He is to spend two years in prison in Caesarea; when he arrives in Rome, he is to spend another three years.

[stood by him] Another appearance of Jesus Christ to Paul (Acts 22:8,14,18; 1 Cor. 9:1; 1 Cor. 15:8; 2 Cor. 12:1-4).

[Be of good cheer] Greek: *tharseo* (GSN-2293), take courage. Here; Matthew 9:2,22; Matthew 14:27; Mark 6:50; Mark 10:49; Luke 8:48; John 16:33.

Dake: **[for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome]** This is the 14th New Testament prophecy in Acts (Acts 23:11, fulfilled, Acts 27-28). The next prophecy is in Acts 26:16.

Clarke: **Be of good cheer, Paul**—It is no wonder if, with all these trials and difficulties, St. Paul was much dejected in mind; and especially as he had not any direct intimation

from God what the end of the present trials would be: to comfort him and strengthen his faith, God gave him this vision.

Clarke: So must thou bear witness also at Rome—This was pleasing intelligence to Paul, who had long desired to see that city, and preach the Gospel of Christ there. He appears to have had an intimation that he should see it; but how, he could not tell; and this vision satisfied him that he should be sent thither by God himself. This would settle every fear and scruple concerning the issue of the present persecution.

This again shows that Paul was not out of the will of God in going to Jerusalem. The Spirit of God had warned Paul that he could expect bonds and difficulties if he went to Jerusalem. In spite of this, Paul had gone to Jerusalem and had witnessed for the Lord Jesus in that city. Now God tells him that just as he has testified in Jerusalem so he will also bear witness in Rome. This is God's method. Paul had never had such an opportunity to witness in Jerusalem before. Now God is going to give him the opportunity to witness in Rome. It is God's will that he should go to Rome also.

It is important to note that there is no rebuke to Paul from the Lord. He doesn't say, "Look, Paul, I told you not to go to Jerusalem because you would get in trouble there." Rather, the Lord encourages him. He is using this means to get Paul over to Rome.

bear witness at Rome: Warned by friends not to go to Jerusalem, Paul may have begun to doubt his decision. The Lord encouraged Paul not to be afraid because he was under the sovereign care of God. As Paul had borne witness to Jesus as a prisoner in Jerusalem, so he would do as a prisoner in Rome. Paul's chains would glorify God in ways that would have been impossible without them.¹⁶

Spurgeon: Amid the uncongenial sights and sounds of the barracks, the heart of the apostle would have sunk had it not been for the heavenly visitation. Jesus will not leave his faithful servants alone--he will reveal himself to us when we are in sore distress. Never let us despair, for the Lord has more work for us to do yet.

Paul's testimony to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem was an especially significant fulfillment of the prophecy about his life in 9:15.

What a dark place Paul must have been in, sitting alone in the barracks! Two once-in-a-lifetime opportunities blew up in his face, and it would not be surprising if Paul blamed himself for the missed opportunity before the Sanhedrin. After all, wasn't it his reaction to the punch from the High Priest that spoiled everything?

It wouldn't be surprising if Paul sat alone in the barracks that night, with his head in his hands and tears streaming down his face, mourning the lost opportunities for God and how he might have spoiled them. Paul probably wondered if God would ever, ever want to use him again, or if this was the end.

"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." (Morgan)

¹⁶ The Nelson Study Bible

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**.

But, in a marvelous way, **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).

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.

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 you *in* whatever you are facing now.¹⁷

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.

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 can still say to Paul, **be of good cheer**.

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, because he knows that he has a great God.

¹⁷ <http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries>

Acts 23:12

And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.

Vow precedent: 1 Sam 14:24.

[**till they had killed Paul**] They either broke their vow or died.

Clarke: That they would neither eat nor drink, etc.—These forty Jews were no doubt of the class of the *sicarii* mentioned before, (similar to those afterwards called assassins), a class of fierce zealots, who took justice into their own hand; and who thought they had a right to despatch all those who, according to their views, were not orthodox in their religious principles. If these were, in their bad way, conscientious men, must they not all perish through hunger, as God put it out of their power to accomplish their vow? No: for the doctrine of sacerdotal absolution was held among the Jews as among the Papists: hence it is said, in Hieros. Avodah Zarah, fol. 40: “He that hath made a vow not to eat any thing, wo to him, if he eat; and wo to him, if he do not eat. If he eat, he sinneth against his vow; and if he do not eat, he sinneth against his life.” What must such a man do in this case? Let him go to the wise men, and they will loose him from his vow, as it is written, Proverbs 12:18: “The tongue of the wise is health.” When vows were so easily dispensed with, they might be readily multiplied.

BBC: Revolutionary-minded Jews considered some assassinations pious acts; Herod the Great had once executed ten Pharisees who had formed an association by oath for the purpose of killing him. If Paul’s enemies eventually broke their oaths to kill him, Jewish law would simply require them to bring atonement offerings to the temple; thus their oath here does not mean they would literally starve.

JNTC: Judeans (see 21:20, Yn 1:19N), or possibly “unbelieving Jews” (see 9:22–23).

Took an oath, saying they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Sha’ul, which they failed to do (vv. 16–35). But they didn’t starve to death, for such an oath could be dissolved by the rabbis.

“The sages have allowed four kinds of vows to be nullified: vows of urging, vows of exaggeration, vows made in error and vows made under duress” (Mishna N’darim 3:1).

See Numbers 30:3–16(2–16) and Deuteronomy 23:22–24(21–23) on vows; and compare 18:18&N, Mt 5:33–37&N.

Acts 23:13

And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy.

BKC: So great was the hatred for Paul, the very next morning . . . 40 fanatical Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed him (cf. the crowd’s efforts to kill him; 21:31). The verb for taking an oath is

cf. *confer*, compare

anathematizō (whence the Eng. “anathema”), which means a person binds himself under a curse if he does not fulfill his oath. Presumably these men were later released from this oath by lawyers because Paul’s circumstances changed through a dramatic series of events.

Acts 23:14

And they came to the chief priests and elders, and said, We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul.

[**curse**] Greek: *anathema* (GSN-334), curse. Here; Romans 9:3; 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Cor. 16:22; Galatians 1:8-9.

BBC: Ambushes by robbers and terrorists were common, especially at night. During these years shortly before the Jewish war with Rome, the *sicarii* (Acts 21:38) regularly assassinated Jews suspected of collaboration with the Romans, and all Palestine was uneasy; this report is thus quite believable. That aristocratic priests, who in the war of 66-70 turned out to have their own violent agendas, would cooperate in this plot is not surprising. (These priests would be some high Sadducean members of the council, not Pharisees.)

When the Pharisee/Sadducee controversy died down, the religious leaders refocused their attention on Paul. To these leaders, politics and position had become more important than God. They were ready to plan another murder, just as they had done with Jesus. But as always, God was in control.

ESV: The chief priests and elders were the dominant force on the Sanhedrin, and the majority of these were Sadducees, who were the ones most opposed to Paul. The conspirators do not seem to have approached the Pharisees.

Acts 23:15

Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain that he bring him down unto you to morrow, as though ye would inquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him..

[Never underestimate the ability of men to rationalize!]

Regret: tendency for religious people to become instruments of evil and ruin the cause they profess to cherish...

This plot also failed (Acts 23:16-30).

Clarke: **And we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him**—We shall lie in wait, and despatch him before he can reach the chief captain. The plan was well and deeply laid; and nothing but an especial providence could have saved Paul.

This is the plot to put Paul to death. It's well that the Lord Himself has made it very clear to Paul that He has a different plan for him; he is going to Rome.

BKC: The complicity of the chief priests and elders in this plot reveals both their lack of a legitimate case against Paul and their base characters. The fanatic zeal of the 40 men is also seen because a number of them would certainly be killed in overcoming Paul's guards, should their plan be carried out.

Spurgeon: They intended to assassinate him upon the stairs which led down from the fortress to the court. Seldom has a greater crime been contemplated in the name of religion. However, the Lord had a spy upon their secret conclave, and their stratagem was defeated. The deepest design of hell are frustrated by the Lord.

Acts 23:16

And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul.

“A secret is something you tell one person at a time...” [What a “coincidence” that Paul's nephew was able to overhear the plot, etc.]

God's use of children:

Captive maid 2	Kgs 5:2
Willing lad	John 6:9

[sister's son] This is all we know of Paul's family besides references in Romans 16:7,11,21.

[lying in wait] Greek: *enedron* (GSN-1747), only here and in Acts 25:3.

[went and entered into the castle, and told Paul] The young man might have accidentally come upon the plotters and heard them talking of killing Paul, so he hurried and told him.

BBC: The Diaspora Jewish writer Artapanus reported that Moses learned of a similar plot against himself and was thus able to thwart it. If Paul's sister was raised with him in Jerusalem, the whole family had presumably moved there from Tarsus after Paul's birth, rather than only having sent him there to study.

LAN: This is the only Biblical reference to Paul's family. Some scholars believe that Paul's family had disowned Paul when he became a Christian. Paul wrote of having suffered the loss of everything for Christ (Phil. 3:8). Paul's nephew was able to see Paul,

even though Paul was in protective custody, because Roman prisoners were accessible to their relatives and friends who could bring them food and other amenities.

It is easy to overlook children, assuming that they aren't old enough to do much for the Lord. But a young boy played an important part in protecting Paul's life. God can use anyone, of any age, who is willing to yield to him. Jesus made it clear that children are important (Matthew 18:2-6). Give children the importance God gives them.

Acts 23:17

Then Paul called one of the centurions unto *him*, and said, Bring this young man unto the chief captain: for he hath a certain thing to tell him.

[called one of the centurions] Paul had already had divine assurance that he would see Rome (Acts 23:11), but he also knew it to be wise to use every means he could to prevent death at the hands of these murderers.

Clarke: Bring this young man unto the chief captain—Though St. Paul had the most positive assurance from Divine authority that he should be preserved, yet he knew that the Divine providence acts by reasonable and prudent means; and that, if he neglected to use the means in his power, he could not expect God's providence to work in his behalf. He who will not help himself, according to the means and power he possesses, has neither reason nor revelation to assure him that he shall receive any assistance from God.

Acts 23:18

So he took him, and brought *him* to the chief captain, and said, Paul the prisoner called me unto *him*, and prayed me to bring this young man unto thee, who hath something to say unto thee.

[Paul the prisoner] Paul cherished this title as an honor (Ephes. 3:1; Ephes. 4:1; 2 Tim. 1:8; cp. Philemon 1:9).

The military showed great deference to their Roman prisoner, as evidenced by the quick response of both the centurion and the tribune (Lysias) to Paul and his nephew.

Acts 23:19

Then the chief captain took him by the hand, and went *with him* aside privately, and asked *him*, What is that thou hast to tell me?

“Took him by the hand” implies a young child. If a Roman citizen was murdered the consequences would be grave...

[took him by the hand] This suggests that he was a mere boy. Perhaps he was attending school as his uncle, Paul, had done when he sat at the feet of Gamaliel.

[What is that thou hast to tell me?] This is Question 69 in Acts, the next question is in Acts 25:9.

Acts 23:20

And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul to morrow into the council, as though they would inquire somewhat of him more perfectly.

Acts 23:21

But do not thou yield unto them: for there lie in wait for him of them more than forty men, which have bound themselves with an oath, that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him: and now are they ready, looking for a promise from thee.

Since the plot was thwarted, one wonders if the conspirators died of hunger and thirst! Probably not: by rabbinic law, in the event a vow became impossible to fulfill, those under it were released from its terms (see Mishnah, *Nedarim* 3.3).

Acts 23:22

So the chief captain *then* let the young man depart, and charged *him*, See thou tell no man that thou hast showed these things to me.

Junia may have been the sister (Rom 16:7).

McGee: Let's stop to note something here. I find today that there is a group of super-pious folk, very sincere and very well-meaning, which tells me I should not go to a doctor concerning my cancer or other illnesses but that I should trust the Lord to heal me. Well, I certainly do trust the Lord; I have turned my case over to the Great Physician, and I believe He provides doctors. It would have been a simple thing for Paul to have told his nephew, "Thanks for telling me the news, but I'm trusting the Lord—so you can go back home." But we find here that Paul used the privileges of his Roman citizenship which were available to him. Obviously the Lord provides these means and He expects us to use them. This in no way means that we are not trusting Him. Rather, we are trusting God to use the methods and the means to accomplish His purpose.

BKC: Paul's unnamed nephew somehow heard about the plot of the 40 and was able to get to the barracks to tell Paul and then the commander. Many unresolved questions come to mind. Was Paul's nephew a Christian? How did he secure this information? Did Paul's sister live in Jerusalem? If Paul had relatives living in Jerusalem, why did he not stay with them?

The nephew was a young man (vv. 17-19, 22). This Greek word *neanias*, used in verse 17, was earlier used of Paul (7:58) and Eutychus (20:9). It may refer to a man in his twenties or thirties. (*Neaniskos*, a synonym of *neanios*, is used in 23:18 and 22. In v. 19 the NIV has “young man” but the Gr. does not.) When the fortress commander heard of this plan, he cautioned Paul’s nephew not to tell anyone he had reported this.

Acts 23:23

And he called unto *him* two centurions, saying, Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred, at the third hour of the night;

472 soldiers going, Garrison at Antonia approximately 1000 men.

Spearmen = *dexiolabous*: graspers, lance-men.

The chief captain goes into action. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

[Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred] There were 200 foot-soldiers, 70 cavalry, and 200 javelin throwers, led by two centurions—472 men to conduct Paul to Caesarea to Governor Felix.

[third hour of the night] 9:00 p.m. our time. No one could pursue until the gates were open at 6:00 a.m., so they would be well on their way if it was discovered that Paul had departed.

BBC: The commander’s assignment of two hundred soldiers with the centurions (perhaps a paper strength; two centurions might command only 160 troops in practice) to guard Paul would weaken the garrison in Jerusalem’s fortress Antonia by as much as one third; thus they must return quickly (Acts 23:32). The two hundred spearmen are non-Roman light auxiliary infantry. If the Antonia cohort included a regular cavalry unit, it had as many as one hundred horsemen—hence the commander sends most of them with Paul. Given the unrest in Palestine and night attacks by robbers, a smaller contingent would not be safe in the hills of Judea at night.

The Roman procurator or governor resided in Caesarea, visiting Jerusalem only for the feasts (to insure order). Caesarea was the military headquarters for Judea (the Roman overseer for all Syria-Palestine resided in Syria.)

Leaving at 9 p.m. (the night’s “third hour”), only a protracted march would get them well on their way overnight; Caesarea was sixty miles away.

LAN: The Roman commander ordered Paul sent to Caesarea. Jerusalem was the seat of Jewish government, but Caesarea was the Roman headquarters for the area. God works in amazing and amusing ways. There were infinite possibilities of ways God could use to get Paul to Caesarea, but he chose to use the Roman army to deliver Paul from his

vv. verses

v. verse

Gr. Greek

enemies. God's ways are not our ways. Ours are limited; his are not. Don't limit God by asking him to respond your way. When God intervenes, anything can happen, so much more and so much better than you could ever anticipate.

Paul was to be escorted out of the city under cover of darkness surrounded by hundreds of soldiers. Apparently the commander thought the threat of assassination was serious enough to commit almost half of the entire garrison at the Fortress of Antonia to escorting Paul at least part of the way to Rome.¹⁸

Acts 23:24

And provide *them* beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring *him* safe unto Felix the governor.

[Felix the governor] Felix was a free man of the emperor Claudius, the brother of Pallas, chief favorite of the emperor. Tacitus tells us that he governed with all the authority of a king and the baseness and insolence of a slave. He was an unrighteous governor, a base mercenary, a very wicked man. Suetonius says that he had three wives, each a daughter of a king. Claudius made him Procurator of Judea in A.D. 52. Josephus gives many details of the stirring times of his rule, and of his cruelty and treachery (Antiquities, 20:7:1; Antiquities, 20:8:5-7).¹⁹

BBC: Shortly after Tiberius Antonius Felix (Tacitus said Antonius, Josephus said Claudius; an inscription may support Josephus's position but the matter is disputed) became procurator of Palestine, he convinced Drusilla to divorce her husband and marry him (Acts 24:24). He secured his position because his brother was Pallas, a powerful freedman of Emperor Claudius. Tacitus reported that Felix was corrupt, having a king's authority but a slave's mind (from a Roman aristocrat, the latter was hardly a compliment). Josephus likewise condemned him as thoroughly corrupt, accusing him of bloody massacres and repression. He remained procurator from A.D. 52 to 59 or 60.

McGee: This is quite an army that is going to escort Paul down to Caesarea. Is this what one calls trusting the Lord? Of course it is the captain who has ordered it, but Paul has called for this type of protection from him. Certainly Paul is in the will of God in doing this. It certainly reveals the danger that Paul was in. There is no doubt that the Jews had every intention to put him to death.

He is sending Paul to Caesarea to appear before Felix, the governor. The Roman governors had their headquarters in Caesarea and only occasionally went up to Jerusalem. Pilate had had his headquarters there. The ruins of that Roman city are still there today. It has a lovely situation on the coast.

I can understand why those Romans would rather live in Caesarea than in Jerusalem. The climate was delightful when I was there, and I got very cold in Jerusalem.

¹⁸ The Nelson Study Bible

¹⁹ Dake Study Notes, Dake's Study Bible

Paul is to be sent to Felix in Caesarea. This will remove Paul from the danger in Jerusalem.

JNTC: Felix the governor, or, more exactly, the procurator of Judea. He was governor of Shomron (Samaria) from 48 to 52 C.E., while Cumanas ruled Judea. When the latter was removed from office for failing to suppress rioting between the Jews and Gentiles of Caesarea, Felix replaced him. About him Tacitus wrote, “With all cruelty and lust he exercised the power of a king with the spirit of a slave,” referring to his being a freedman of Emperor Claudius’ mother Antonia. Felix had three wives in succession, the last being Drusilla (24:17).

Spurgeon: Forty had sworn to murder him, but five hundred protectors are found for him. The angels of the Lord can use a band of soldiers for the same purpose. The apostle left Jerusalem attended like a prince: his enemies were powerless to touch a hair of his head. He went down to Caesarea, and was out of reach of the daggers of his foes.

ESV: The entire Roman force in Jerusalem consisted of a single cohort of up to 1,000 soldiers. The importance that Lysias attached to his prisoner is evidenced by his sending approximately half the force to protect him.

Acts 23:25

And he wrote a letter after this manner:

But it does amount to a letter of acquittal of any serious charge against Paul!

[letter after this manner] This letter is no doubt an exact reproduction by Luke, as seems clear from the letter itself. The whole of it is so perfectly formal as to prove this. It is in good style of the letter writing of that day.

Clarke: He wrote a letter after this manner—It appears that this was not only the substance of the letter, but the letter itself: the whole of it is so perfectly formal as to prove this; and in this simple manner are all the letters of the ancients formed. In this also we have an additional proof of St. Luke’s accuracy.

BBC: The empire (except perhaps for Egypt) had no postal service except for official government business; most people sent letters via slaves or friends. The commander sends this letter with the soldiers.

McGee: Although Dr. Luke may have had the actual letter, when he says the letter was “after this manner” it probably means that he didn’t have access to the letter but is giving us the sense of it.

Acts 23:26

Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sendeth greeting.

Reference Check (Felix):

(Pilate's successor as Governor of Judea): Made a free man by Antonia, mother of the emperor, Claudius. Brother of another liberated slave, Pallas.

Tacitus: Felix = master of cruelty and lust, who exercised powers of a king in the spirit of a slave.

Scoundrel who exploited political situation; encouraged conflicts and confiscated any loot that became available. During his rule, the countryside became a center of anarchy and the mountains of Judea became havens from which guerilla fighters operated. Hated by everybody.

[Claudius Lysias] He was the procurator's legate and was responsible for order in Jerusalem. He had acted in promptness and vigor and kind consideration of his prisoner. He said nothing about his proposing to scourge a Roman citizen. He respected Paul more than Felix (Acts 24:27) or even Festus (Acts 25:9,14; Acts 26:24).

[most excellent] An official title. Here; Acts 24:3; Acts 26:25; Luke 1:3.

[governor] Greek: *hegemon* (GSN-2232), the general term for a subordinate ruler.

BBC: This was the standard greeting in letters, and the respectful title was standard for an equestrian official (equestrians were the so-called knight class). Although Felix was not equestrian, his power and status as procurator made that fact irrelevant. Indeed, despite his low birth, his three successive wives (Drusilla probably being the final one) were all from royal households.

Felix was the Roman governor or procurator of Judea from A.D. 52 to 59. This was the same position Pontius Pilate had held. While the Jews were given much freedom to govern themselves, the governor ran the army, kept the peace, and gathered the taxes.

LAN: How did Luke know what was written in the letter from Claudius Lysias? In his concern for historical accuracy, Luke used many sources to make sure that his writings were correct (see Luke 1:1-4). This letter was probably read aloud in court when Paul came before Felix to answer the Jews' accusations. Also, because Paul was a Roman citizen, a copy may have been given to him as a courtesy.

Notice the formal manner of address. In those days they didn't sign letters as we do today. They put their name at the beginning of the letter rather than at the end of the letter.

ESV: Lysias's letter follows standard Greek form: sender (**Lysias**), to recipient (**Felix**), followed by **greetings** (Gk. *chairein*). He gave Felix the deferential title **Excellency** (Gk. *kratistos*).

Acts 23:27

This man was taken of the Jews, and should have been killed of them: then came I with an army, and rescued him, having understood that he was a Roman.

[**understood that he was a Roman**] He did not understand this until after he ordered Paul to be scourged (Acts 22:27).

BBC: Subordinate officials sometimes put their own slant on a story to make themselves sound good to their superiors; this commander, who has probably worked his way up through the ranks (Acts 22:28), knows how to play the game well. Local officials (and as Rome's chief representative in Jerusalem, this military tribune was an official) had to determine which cases should be referred to the procurator. This was obviously such a case.

McGee: The captain in Jerusalem wants the governor in Caesarea to know that he is performing his duty. He is protecting Roman citizens.²⁰

Lysias had no charges to list, other than that all complaints against Paul had to do with "their [Jewish] law" (v. 29) and not Roman law. Throughout the rest of Acts, all the Roman officials testify to Paul's innocence of any charges against him.

Prepare two hundred soldiers: Again, we are impressed with the wise action and fairness of the Roman commander, whose name was **Cladius Lysias**, as we learn from his letter.

Remember that Acts was likely written as a defense brief or a "friend-of-the-court" document for Paul before his case was heard by Caesar Nero in Rome. It should not surprise us that Luke emphasizes those events that cast Roman officials in a positive light!

I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman: In his letter, Claudius implies that he learned of Paul's Roman citizenship right away, and he says nothing of the way Paul was bound twice and almost scourged for the same of interrogation.

Acts 23:28

And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council:

[**I brought him forth into their council**] Referring to Acts 22:30-23:10.

Acts 23:29

Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds.

²⁰McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:616). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

[nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds] This was helpful to Paul in facing Felix and others. He was to need all the help he could get in face of Jewish hatred.

Acts 23:30

And when it was told me how that the Jews laid wait for the man, I sent straightway to thee, and gave commandment to his accusers also to say before thee what *they had* against him. Farewell.

[I sent straightway to thee] I sent him at once due to the plot against his life, and because you are the proper person before whom this case should be tried.

[accusers] Greek: *kategoros* (GSN-2725), here; Acts 23:35; Acts 24:8; Acts 25:16,18; John 8:10; Rev. 12:10.

[Farewell] Greek: *rhonnumi* (GSN-4517), be in good health.

BKC: When a prisoner was forwarded to a superior, the subordinate officer was required to accompany the subject with a written statement of the case.

This letter from Claudius Lysias presents the essentials of the case. The commander bent the truth in saying he rescued Paul (v. 27) because he actually learned from a subordinate that Paul was a Roman citizen (22:26). He also discreetly omitted any reference to his preparing to have Paul flogged (cf. 22:25, 29).

The importance of this document is seen in 23:29 where the commander declared Paul to be innocent. Compare similar comments by Gallio (18:14-15), the city executive of Ephesus (19:40), Pharisees (23:9), Festus (25:25), and Herod Agrippa II (26:31-32).

Acts 23:31

Then the soldiers, as it was commanded them, took Paul, and brought *him* by night to Antipatris.

Caesarea = 60 miles from Jerusalem.

Antipatris, 35 miles from Jerusalem, between Joppa and Caesarea.

Two kinds of provinces: Senatorial and Imperial. Cilicia, being an imperial province under direct control of the emperor himself. The steps are being laid to bring Paul face-to-face with emperor Nero...

v. verse
cf. *confer*, compare

[Antipatris] A small town in the plain of Sharon, about 40 miles from Jerusalem. It was the ancient Capharsaba mentioned by Josephus (*Antiquities*, 16:5:2). It was rebuilt by Herod the Great and named Antipatris in honor of his father Antipater.

Clarke: Antipatris—This place, according to Josephus, *Antiq. lib. xiii. cap. 23*, was anciently called Capharsaba, and is supposed to be the same which, in 1 Maccabees 7:31, is called Capharsalama, or Carphasalama. It was rebuilt by Herod the Great, and denominated Antipatris, in honor of his father Antipater. It was situated between Joppa and Caesarea, on the road from Jerusalem to this latter city. Josephus says it was fifty stadia from Joppa. The distance between Jerusalem and Caesarea was about seventy miles.

BBC: Troops were able and trained to undertake all-night marches when necessary, as Josephus testifies. Antipatris was some twenty-five miles south of Caesarea, about a day's march. But by the shortest route Antipatris was thirty-five to forty miles (fortunately downhill) from Jerusalem, hence the troops would have to march all night at a much faster pace than normal travelers.

ESV: Antipatris was 35 of the 62 miles (56 of the 100 km) by road from Jerusalem to Caesarea (v. 33), a difficult but not impossible distance for soldiers to march in the cool of the night. Only the 70 “horsemen” (v. 32) continued to Caesarea. Antipatris (ancient Aphek in Sharon, identified with Tell Ras el-Ain) was rebuilt under Herod the Great in the first century b.c. and renamed for his father Antipater. Herodian-era shops, pavement, Roman coins, and a fortress have been uncovered in excavations at Aphek. On the city of Caesarea,

Acts 23:32

On the morrow they left the horsemen to go with him, and returned to the castle:

Clarke: On the morrow they left the horsemen—Being now so far from Jerusalem, they considered Paul in a state of safety from the Jews, and that the seventy horse would be a sufficient guard; the four hundred foot, therefore, returned to Jerusalem, and the horse went on to Caesarea with Paul. We need not suppose that all this troop did reach Antipatris on the same night in which they left Jerusalem; therefore, instead of, they brought him by night to Antipatris, we may understand the text thus—Then the soldiers took Paul by night, and brought him to Antipatris. And the thirty-second verse need not to be understood as if the foot reached the castle of Antonia the next day, (though all this was possible), but that, having reached Antipatris, and refreshed themselves, they set out the same day, on their march to Jerusalem; on the morrow they returned, that is, they began their march back again to the castle.

BKC: The journey to Antipatris from Jerusalem was more than 35 miles. This must have been a forced march because they arrived by the next day. The terrain from Jerusalem to Lydda or Joppa (modern-day Lod; cf. 9:32-43), seven or eight miles before Antipatris,

cf. *confer*, compare

was difficult and would provide suitable cover for an ambush party. Once the entourage was in Antipatris the soldiers were no longer needed. The remaining 27 miles to Caesarea could be traversed with less danger.

Slipping out of Jerusalem when the city was quiet, the foot soldiers and cavalry probably attracted little attention. Ahead lay **Antipatris**, 40 miles away, by way of a winding downhill road where an ambush would have been disastrous. Antipatris was used by the Romans as a relay station for their troops. The rest of the journey was over open plain where there was no need for a large number of soldiers. The foot soldiers returned to Jerusalem, leaving the seventy horsemen to escort Paul the remaining distance to Caesarea, the capital of Judea. The hand of God over Paul's life can be seen in the provision of such extraordinary protection.²¹

Acts 23:33

Who, when they came to Caesarea, and delivered the epistle to the governor, presented Paul also before him.

[**Caesarea**] Caesarea was now the political capital and home of the governor instead of Jerusalem. Being a seaport town it could speed communication with Rome. It flourished also as a Christian center of that vicinity until the seventh century. The city has long been destroyed even its ruins have disappeared.

Acts 23:34

And when the governor had read *the letter*, he asked of what province he was. And when he understood that *he was of Cilicia*;

[**Cilicia**] Cilicia was in the province of Syria and therefore under jurisdiction of Felix.

the governor: Antonius Felix governed Judea from A.D. 52 to 60. Felix had been a slave, but had gained the status of freedman under the Emperor Claudius. Because Felix's brother was a friend of the emperor, Felix's political career blossomed, even though he was not popular among his peers. Felix was known for indulging in every kind of lust, and the writer Tacitus described him as "exercising the powers of a king with the character of a slave." **he was from Cilicia:** After reading the letter from Jerusalem, Felix wanted to know Paul's home province. When he learned it was Cilicia he decided to hear the case, because the political status of Cilicia did not require its natives to be sent back there for trial.²²

At this time Judea and **Cilicia** were both a part of the Roman province of Syria. Since Felix administered a portion of that **province** and Paul's home was within it, Felix determined that Paul's case was within his jurisdiction.

²¹ The Nelson Study Bible

²² The Nelson Study Bible

Acts 23:35

I will hear thee, said he, when thine accusers are also come. And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's judgment hall.

[when thine accusers are also come] Felix acted wisely in not hearing Paul until his accusers were present. When one side is heard at a time facts are generally obscure and the evil magnified. Hear both sides together and the evil is lessened.

[judgment hall] Greek: *praitorion* (GSN-4232), a palace built by Herod the Great for holding courts, with apartments adjoining to confine prisoners. Or, it was a guard-room attached to Herod's palace. See notes, □ Matthew 27:27; John 18:28.

BBC: Hearings for Roman citizens arraigned on capital charges required painstaking examination, if Felix were to follow the law. The procurator's residence in Caesarea was a palace built by Herod the Great; Paul was thus kept elsewhere in Felix's own residence.

McGee: We will find that his accusers were quick to come down to Caesarea. They didn't hesitate to follow Paul. As we move along, I think you will detect that Paul is not defending himself as much as he is witnessing for Christ. The Lord Jesus had said he would witness before governors and rulers and kings. He is being brought before them. This is God's method. Paul is in the will of God, and God is carrying out His purpose.

BKC: When the cavalry and Paul arrived, Felix held a minor preliminary interrogation. Felix was the procurator (governor) of Judea about A.D. 52-58. He is one of three Roman procurators mentioned in the New Testament. The others are Pontius Pilate (A.D. 26-36) and Porcius Festus (A.D. 58-62). Felix married Drusilla (24:24), a sister of Herod Agrippa II, the Agrippa in 25:13-26:32. (See the chart on the Herods at Luke 1:5.)

After Felix learned Paul was from Cilicia he determined to hear the case. Evidently a case could be tried in the province of the accused or in the province in which his alleged crime took place. The question actually involved "what sort of (*poias*) province" Paul was from. At this time Cilicia was not a full province but was under the legate of Syria, for whom Felix was a deputy. The legate would not want to be bothered with such a small case as this. Furthermore, Felix would not want to incur the Jews' wrath by forcing them to present their case against Paul in his hometown Tarsus, a city so far away. Felix could make only one decision and that was to hear the case. But witnesses against Paul would have to be present (cf. Acts 23:30).

Spurgeon: So that he was not put in a public prison, but kept in a room of a palace built by Herod the Great. How he must have admired the manner in which the Lord protected him! Let us trust in God, and be very courageous for the gospel, and the Lord himself will screen us from all harm.

cf. *confer*, compare

Clarke Summary:

ON the preceeding chapter many useful observations may be made.

1. Paul, while acting contrary to the Gospel of Christ, pleaded conscience as his guide. Conscience is generally allowed to be the rule of human actions; but it cannot be a right rule, unless it be well informed. While it is unenlightened it may be a guide to the perdition of its professor, and the cause of the ruin of others. That conscience can alone be trusted in which the light of God's Spirit and God's truth dwells. An ill-informed conscience may burn even the saints for God's sake!
2. No circumstance in which a man can be placed can excuse him from showing respect and reverence to the authorities which God, in the course of his providence, has instituted for the benefit of civil or religious society. All such authorities come originally from God, and can never lose any of their rights on account of the persons who are invested with them. An evil can never be of use, and a good may be abused; but it loses not its character, essential qualities, or usefulness, because of this abuse.
3. Paul availed himself of the discordant sentiments of his judges, who had agreed to show him no justice, that he might rid himself out of their hands. To take advantage of the sentiments and dispositions of an audience, without deceiving it, and to raise dissension between the enemies of the truth, is an impotent artifice, when truth itself is not violated and when error is exposed thereby to public view.
4. The Pharisees and Sadducees strove together. God frequently raises up defenders of the principles of truth, even among those who, in practice, are its decided enemies. "Though," says one, "I do not like the truth, yet will I defend it." A man clothed with sovereign authority, vicious in his heart, and immoral in his life, fostered those principles of truth and righteousness by which error was banished from these lands, and pure and undefiled religion established among us for many generations.
5. The providence of God, and his management of the world, are in many respects great mysteries; but, as far as we are individually concerned, all is plain. Paul had the fullest assurance, from the mouth of Christ himself, that he should see Rome; and, consequently, that he should be extricated from all his present difficulties. Why then did he not quietly sit still, when his nephew informed him that forty men had conspired to murder him? Because he knew that God made use of the prudence with which he has endowed man as an agent in that very providence by which he is supported; and that to neglect the natural means of safety with which God provides us is to tempt and dishonor him, and induce him in judgment to use those means against us, which, in his mercy, he had designed for our comfort and salvation. Prudence is well associated even with an apostolical spirit. Every being that God has formed, he designs should accomplish those functions for which he has endowed it with the requisite powers.
6. Claudius Lysias sent Paul to Felix. "In the generality of human events," says one, "we do not often distinguish the designs of God from those of men. The design of Lysias, in preserving Paul from the rage of the Jews, was to render his own conduct free from exception: the design of God was, that he might bring Paul safely to Rome, that he might attack idolatry in its strongest fort, and there establish the Christian faith." God governs the world, and works by proper means;

and counterworks evil or sinister devices, so as ultimately to accomplish the purposes of his will, and cause all things to work together for good to them that love Him.

7. Felix acted prudently when he would not even hear St. Paul till he had his accusers face to face. How many false judgments, evil surmises, and uncharitable censures would be avoided, did men always adopt this reasonable plan! Hear either side of a complaint separately, and the evil seems very great: hear both together, and the evil is generally lessened by one half. *Audi et alteram partem*—hear the other side, says a heathen: remember, if you have an ear for the first complainant, you have one also for the second.