

## Wednesday Evening Bible Study

January 3, 2023

Series - The Life and Writings of the Apostle Paul

*Paul Before the Council and His Escape to Caesarea*

Text – Acts 23

Opening Verses – Acts 22:30 – 23:1

### Introduction

In the end of chapter 22, the chief captain, Claudius Lysius, is trying to figure out what he is going to do with this prisoner who seems to have the Jewish, religious community in Jerusalem in an uproar. When Lysius discovers that Paul is a Roman citizen, he determines to have Paul meet with his accusers so that he (Lysius) could make a judgment as to Paul's guilt. Here, in chapter 23, Paul will re-appear before his people, this time before the Chief Priest and the entire Council.



### Overview of Chaps. 22 & 23

This map gives an overview of the places that Paul went while he was at Jerusalem. Points 1 & 2 represent the seven days that Paul had spent in Jerusalem going in and out of the temple. When the seven days of the purification vow that Paul was participating in were almost ended, Paul was back in the temple, and was spotted by some Jews from Asia who had begun to make

accusation against him that he had brought Trophimus, a Gentile, into the temple, which was a crime worthy of death. Paul is thrust out of the temple (3) and is then rescued by Claudius Lysius and brought to the castle, which was the Tower of Antonia (4), a barracks that housed Roman soldiers. Lysius brings Paul, the next day to the Council (5), but must be rescued again, and brought back to the castle (6).

The word for Council in v. 1 is συνέδριον (*synedrion*), which is the Sanhedrin, the great religious governing body at Jerusalem, consisting of seventy-one members, viz. scribes, elders, prominent members of the high priestly families and the high priest, the president of the assembly. The most important causes were brought before this tribunal, since the Roman rulers of Judaea had left to it the power of trying such cases, and of pronouncing sentence of

death, with the limitation that a capital sentence pronounced by the Sanhedrin was not valid unless it was confirmed by the Roman procurator. (Thayer's Greek Lexicon)

## I. The Council Assembles and Is Entangled by Paul (vs. 1 – 9)

Paul looks his accusers in the eye.

*"And Paul, earnestly beholding (ἀτενίζω – atenizō – to fix eyes upon, to gaze upon) the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived (πολιτεύομαι - politeuomai – to behave as a citizen) in all good conscience before God until this day."* (Acts 23:1)

Paul addresses the Council as his brethren, which indicated to them that he was a Jew by birth. Paul told them that he was a good citizen of the Jewish people, meaning that he had never done anything, or acted in any way as an offence to the Nation of Israel.

Paul claimed to have a "good conscience."

"Conscience" is one of Paul's favorite words; he used it twice in Acts (23:1; 24:16) and twenty-one times in his letters. The word means "to know with, to know together." Conscience is the inner "judge" or "witness" that approves when we do right and disapproves when we do wrong (Romans 2:15). Conscience does not *set* the standard; it only *applies* it. The conscience of a thief would bother him if he told the truth about his fellow crooks just as much as a Christian's conscience would convict him if he told a lie about his friends. Conscience does not make the standards; it only applies the standards of the person, whether they are good or bad, right or wrong.

Conscience may be compared to a window that lets in the light. God's Law is the light; and the cleaner the window is, the more the light shines in. As the window gets dirty, the light gets dimmer; and finally, the light becomes darkness. A good conscience, or pure conscience (1 Timothy 3:9), is one that lets in God's light so that we are properly convicted if we do wrong and encouraged if we do right. A defiled conscience (1 Corinthians 8:7) is one that has been sinned against so much that it is no longer dependable. If a person continues to sin against his conscience, he may end up with an evil conscience (Hebrews 10:22) or a seared conscience (1 Timothy 4:2). Then he would feel convicted if he did what was *right* rather than what was wrong!

Paul had persecuted the church and had even caused innocent people to die, so how could he claim to have a good conscience? *He had lived up to the light that he had*, and that is all that a good conscience requires. After he became a Christian and the bright light of God's

glory shone into his heart (2 Corinthians 4:6), Paul then saw things differently and realized that he was “the chief of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15).<sup>1</sup>

The high priest was obviously not impressed with what Paul had to say and had him struck by one of his officers. Apparently, he felt that Paul could not possibly have a “good conscience.”

*"And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth." (Acts 23:2)*

This High Priest, Ananias, is not the same as Annas who was the High Priest when Jesus was crucified. This man, Ananias, was known for his corruption, and his affinity with the Romans.

Jesus had also been struck by one of the officers of the High Priest before His crucifixion. (John 18:22) Paul reacts to the treatment he received by calling the High Priest a “whited wall”, which meant that Paul thought the High Priest was a hypocrite.

*"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?" (Acts 23:3)*

Jesus had also called the Pharisees “whited sepulchers”.

*"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." (Matthew 23:27)*

Paul was speaking prophetically about God “smiting” Ananias because his own people killed him when a war broke out between the people of Jerusalem and the Romans.

*"And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest?" (Acts 23:4)*

*"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." (Acts 23:5)*

Paul quoted here from Exodus 22:8.

Perhaps Paul did not know it was the High Priest that had ordered him to be smitten. It is believed that Paul had impaired vision. At any rate, Paul declared respect for the office of the High Priest, though he may have had contempt for the person in the office.

Here is where Paul “entangles” the Council:

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<sup>1</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

*"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." (Acts 23:6)*

*"And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided." (Acts 23:7)*

*"For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both." (Acts 23:8)*

*"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." (Acts 23:9)*

Paul went to the root of the matter by claiming that the whole dispute was over the resurrection. Paul claimed that Jesus rose from the dead, which the Pharisees believed was possible. However, the Sadducees denied that resurrection was possible. The two groups forgot about Paul and started fighting amongst themselves.

Keep in mind that some of the members of the Sanhedrin had been around when Jesus was before them, and they had also heard the gospel from Peter and John. Now they were rejecting the gospel given through Paul. Many opportunities were given to these men, yet they refused to believe.

## **II. The Captain Assists Paul and Escorts Him Back to the Castle (v. 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." (Acts 23:10)*

Lysius does not understand all that is going on, but he knows that it would not be safe for Paul to stay here, so he rescues Paul yet again.

## **III. The Lord Appears to Paul and Encourages Him (v. 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." (Acts 23:11)*

Things did not go according to Paul's plan here in Jerusalem. Though he was sure the people would listen to him, they completely rejected the message of Christ. The Lord now comes to encourage him. Isn't it comforting to know that the Lord is with us, even after we have

disobeyed Him? Jesus has a plan B for Paul. He tells him that he is still going to get the chance to take the gospel to Rome.

The Lord is always there for us. (Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 13:5) Consider some of the other passages where the Lord encouraged Paul. (Acts 18:9 – 10; Acts 27:22 – 25; 2 Timothy 4:16 – 17)

The Lord not only cheered Paul up, but he also expressed confidence in him. As we develop Christlikeness in our lives, we also will become more encouraging to the people we minister to.

#### **IV. Some Jews Agree to Execute Paul Secretly (vs. 12 – 15)**

*"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." (Acts 23:12)*

Notice that the devil does not give up. He is relentless. These people are obsessed with Paul and possessed with a passion to kill him. They could think of nothing else. Paul became all that mattered to them.

*"And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy." (Acts 23:13)*

*"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." (Acts 23:14)*

*"Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain that he bring him down unto you to morrow, as though ye would enquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him." (Acts 23:15)*

The Sanhedrin was complicit in this, though they said nothing here. Legally, they were innocent, but in reality, they were just as guilty as the men that made the vow.

I wonder how many of them went through with their vow of not eating or drinking.

#### **V. The Plot is Ascertained and Paul is Escorted to Caesarea (vs. 16 – 32)**

*"And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul." (Acts 23:16)*

*"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." (Acts 23:17)*

*"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." (Acts 23:18)*

*"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?" (Acts 23:19)*

*"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 enquire somewhat of him more perfectly." (Acts 23:20)*

*"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." (Acts 23:21)*

*"So the chief captain then let the young man depart, and charged him, See thou tell no man that thou hast shewed these things to me." (Acts 23:22)*

*"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 (9 PM);" (Acts 23:23)*

*"And provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor." (Acts 23:24)*

*"And he wrote a letter after this manner:" (Acts 23:25)*

*"Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sendeth greeting." (Acts 23:26)*

*"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." (Acts 23:27)*

You will notice that Lysias paints a picture here that does not necessarily reflect the reality. He did not know that Paul was a Roman until the day after he rescued him. Why is it that we always tell the story in such a way to make ourselves look like the hero. We exaggerate the truth to make ourselves look better, and we leave out certain details that might make us look bad.

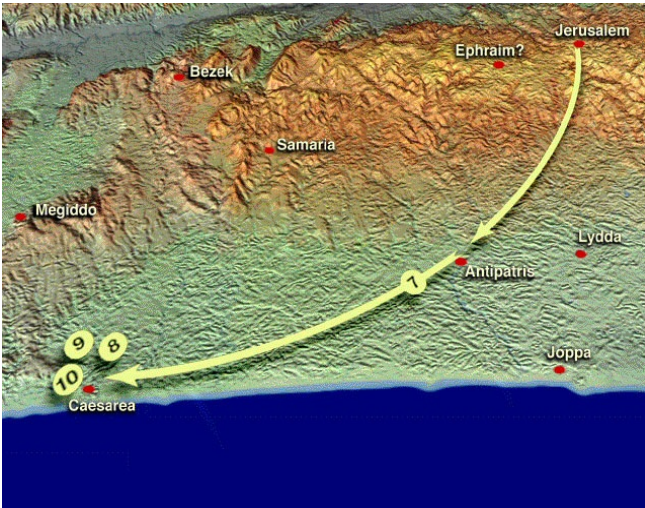
*"And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council:" (Acts 23:28)*

*"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." (Acts 23:29)*

*"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." (Acts 23:30)*

*"Then the soldiers, as it was commanded them, took Paul, and brought him by night to Antipatris." (Acts 23:31)*

*"On the morrow they left the horsemen to go with him, and returned to the castle:" (Acts 23:32)*



#### Overview of Trip to Caesarea

So, Paul leaves Jerusalem at 9 PM, and travels with 200 guards on foot, along with 70 horsemen. They make it as far as Antipatris, which is 37 miles from Jerusalem. The 200 footmen will return to Jerusalem at this point, but the cavalry will continue with Paul until he gets to Felix.

The trip to Antipatris must have taken all night, and they were still 27 miles from Caesarea.

#### **VI. Paul Arrives in Caesarea and Is Enquired of By Governor Felix (vs. 33 – 35)**

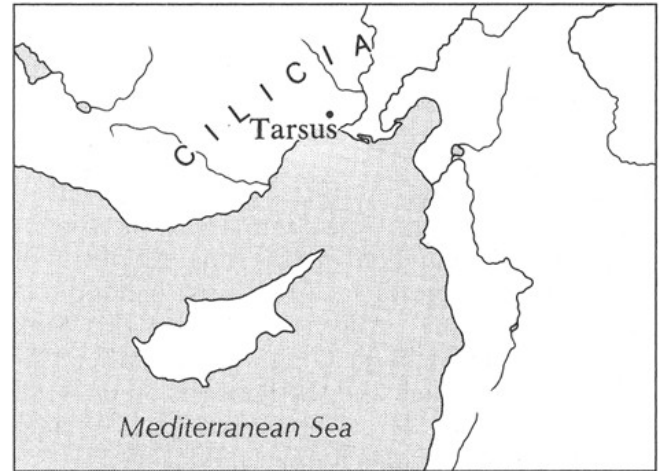
Claudius Felix, procurator of Judea from a.d. 52–59, plays a major role in the following chapter of Acts. A knowledge of his background and of general conditions during his administration throws significant light on the Acts narrative. Felix owed his high position to his brother Pallas, who had considerable influence in the court of the emperor Claudius. Both brothers were freedmen of the imperial family. The high procuratorial office granted Felix was something almost unheard of for a former slave and was doubtless secured through his brother's influence in the imperial court. That it was considered with disdain in some Roman circles is reflected in Tacitus's judgment that Felix "wielded royal power with the instincts of a slave" (*History* 5.9). The reference to "royal power" could be related to either his administration or to his family life. His administration was marked by the rising tide of Jewish nationalism with many insurrections, both political and religious. All were brutally suppressed by the procurator. He tended to be arbitrary in his dispensation of justice and totally lacking in understanding of or sympathy for the Jews. This only heightened the anti-Roman feelings of the Jews and proliferated the freedom movements. Felix's ambitious and pretentious nature was nowhere demonstrated more clearly than in

his marriages. He had three wives. All were princesses. The first was the granddaughter of Antony and Cleopatra. The third was Drusilla, the daughter of Agrippa I (see 24:24). Felix's administrative ineptitude was bound to catch up with him sooner or later, and he was finally removed from office for his total mismanagement of a dispute between the Jews and Gentiles of Caesarea (see 24:27).<sup>2</sup>

Felix was not only the son-in-law of Herod I, but he was also the brother-in-law of Herod II who we will meet in the chapter 25.

*"Who, when they came to Caesarea, and delivered the epistle to the governor, presented Paul also before him." (Acts 23:33)*

*"And when the governor had read the letter, he asked of what province he was. And when he understood that he was of Cilicia;" (Acts 23:34)*



Felix' asked Paul what province he was from to determine if he had jurisdiction over the trial. Since both Cilicia and Judaea were both part of legate, and province of Syria, it was within his jurisdiction. According to Roman Law, either the citizenship of the offender or the location of the offence determined jurisdiction. In this case, Felix presided over both places.

*"I will hear thee, said he, when thine accusers are also come. And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's judgment hall." (Acts 23:35)*

Paul was to be detained here in Herod's Judgment Hall, which was formerly a palace, until Felix assembled all of Paul's accusers.

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<sup>2</sup> Polhill, J. B. (1995). *Acts* (Vol. 26, p. 476). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.