

## Acts 23

After a tumultuous day which began with Paul standing as charge for four men who had a vow (and which day almost completed the seven required for the ritual), Asian Jews who were his antagonists and who had seen detested Gentiles with him in the city, assumed Paul had violated the sacred temple by carrying them there and these Jews, seeing him in the temple, created a great uproar with the intent of killing Paul. Save for the intervention by the chief captain who snatched him from their hands, they would have succeeded in slaying him. Paul asked permission of the Captain to speak to the people and when it was granted, Paul told of his earlier persecution of Christians, his conversion to Christ and how God had commanded him to leave Jerusalem, that He was sending him "far hence to the Gentiles".

The mere mention of "Gentiles" caused a volatile reaction and another demonstration of violent hearts. Dust and garments were cast into the air and they cried "Away with such a fellow. He is not fit to live". The chief captain, unable to understand the Hebrew language in which Paul spoke, removed him from the stairs to the castle and determined he would scourge him. He had seen how Jews reacted to something Paul said, and he intended through scourging, to extract the reason why the Jews hated him so intensely. He concluded Paul must be guilty of some heinous crime for his words to be so provocative to his hearers. But in his anxiousness to "get to the bottom of the matter", he was careless in that he did not seek information from his prisoner. He bound him and prepared him for scourging, both of which things Roman citizens (of which Paul was one) was exempt from. As soldiers prepared him for the tortuous ordeal, Paul's quiet question "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman and uncondemned?" brought the proceedings to a halt (22:25). Surely Paul must have spent many moments, if not hours, as he turned these events over and over in his mind. What would the day bring?

The chief captain did not know what to do with his prisoner. He was in Jerusalem to keep peace and order and that had been seriously disrupted because of the confrontation between Paul and the Jews. But to his dismay he learned that the one who was the principal source of irritation was a Roman citizen, whose rights and privileges he also was anxious to protect. He has just bound him, a serious infraction of Roman rights, and he was determined to find out who or what Paul was. On the morrow he "commanded the chief priests and all the council" to gather

together and placed Paul before them, hoping from this confrontation to learn why he was "accused of the Jews" (22:30).

Paul stood in the midst of the council and asserted his innocence "Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscious to this day", he said (23:1). Paul was not free from blame before God for in his past he had done many things contrary to the name of Jesus and he described himself as the "chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:12). Still, there one thing he was not guilty of; he was not guilty of violating his conscious. These words did not set well with Ananais, the high priest. He commanded some who stood near Paul to smite him on the mouth (23:2). Paul was momentarily infuriated and said "God shall smite thee, thou whited wall, and sittest thou to judge me according to the law and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?" (23:3). When Paul as reminded of whom he spoke, he said "I knew not, brethren, that he was high priest for it is written, 'Thou shall not speak evil of a ruler of thy people'" (23:4; Ex. 22:28). Whether Paul's words "God shall smite thee, thou whited wall" are to be viewed as prophetic or not, Josephus records that Ananais was killed two years later by Assassins.

It is difficult to know just what Paul mean whent he said "I wist not that he was a ruler of the people". Did he not know who Ananais was? Or, if he did, did he not realize that Ananais was the high priest? (There was much political "maneuvring" about the high priest, sometimes Ananais served; sometimes his son-in-law, Caipais). Did "poor eyesight" (as some suppose) prevent him from recognizing the man who was precisely what Paul called him, "A white wall"--viz, a hypocrite? We do not know that answer.

Yet, while Paul might have failed to recognize Ananais, he was familiar with others in the council and knew that while they were "one council" they were also badly divided in doctrine for he perceived that "the one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees". Knowing this, he cried out "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees: touching the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question" (23:16). The apparent unity dissipated "There arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Saducees, and the assembly was divided" (23:7). The Pharisaic doctrine of the resurrection WAS Biblical and it was true that where Paul went, he preached the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus (Rom. 1:15f; 1 Cor. 15:1f). Momentarily, the council forget their present grievance with Paul and the contentious point of their long differences surfaced. They entered that fray with all the eagerness that religious zealots are capable of. They said "We find no evil in this man, and what if

a spirit has spoken unto him, or an angel?" (23:9). The chief captain in frustration removed Paul from their midst and returned him in chains to the castle (23:10).

Was Paul honorable in saying what he did? The Pharisees knew he did not agree wholly with them but on this point they were in perfect agreement. What justice could Paul expect to receive from the council? His only hope for safety or release lay with the Romans. He had not a sliver of doubt that, left in Jewish hands, he would be killed by them.

If the chief captain was frustrated, Paul was more likely discouraged. Again, as always in such moments as this, God comforted him who was His apostle to the Gentiles. That night the Lord stood by him and said "Be of good cheer; for as thou hast testified concerning me at Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome" (23:11).

Next day, the Jews agreed to disagree on their age old dissension. They have a common enemy whom they despise more than they despise each other. A group of more than forty men bound themselves under an oath, swearing they would neither eat nor drink until they slew Paul. They made a conspiracy with the chief priests and elders that they would ask the Captain to bring Paul for further inquiry and when he came, they would rush from some side street and kill him before the soldiers knew what had happened (23:12-16). But, as the plot was whispered around it fell upon the ears of Paul's sister's son who immediately bore that news to Paul (23:16). Without delay, Paul sent the young man to the chief captain to reveal what he had learned. The chief captain told him to tell no man what he had told him and set about to secure Paul's safety (23:17-22).

200 soldiers, 200 spearsmen and 70 horsemen were prepared at the third hour of the night to go to Caesarea, the political capitol of the province, which was about 50-60 miles away. It took all night and a good portion of the next day to reach there. However, at Antipatris (about halfway) the soldiers returned to Jerusalem and the horsemen carried Paul on the last lap of the journey (23:31). It had been just a few days before that Paul had been in Caesarea: he and his company had visited with Philip and brethren and it was here that Agabus, a certain prophet, had prophesied that the Jews in Jerusalem would bind Paul and deliver him into the hands of Gentiles (21:11). As Paul entered the city, did he remember Agabus' dire predictions? Sure he must have!

Very likely Lysias, the chief captain, was happy to be rid of Paul and for

Felix, Roman governor of the province, to deal with him. Still, some apprehension about his binding a Roman citizen without due examination must have lingered. He wrote a letter to Felix which indicated sympathy with Paul's position: "whom I found to be accused about questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or bonds" (23:29). Yet, he was not completely forthright for he said he rescued Paul, "having learned that he was a Roman" (23:27). Of his binding and his aborted intention to scourge him, he was understandable silent. Nor did Paul press the issue. Lysias had rescued him from the Jews. He had gone to great length to prevent his death by the plot of the conspirators and although he had bound Paul in the heat of the fray, he was ignorant of all the circumstances which related to Paul. Without doubt Paul could kindly dismiss this "glitch" in his service as Peter had spoken to Jews many years before "And now, brethren, I know that in ignorance ye did it..." (3:17). After all, he had not suffered scourging. He was safe from the plot of the Jews and he had the Lord's assurance that he must bear witness of Him at Rome.

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