

Paul Before The Sanhedrin

Acts 23:1-11



We are studying a new section in the book of Acts, from the end of chapter 21 to the end of the book. Paul is now a prisoner and will remain a prisoner until his death. As we have seen, Paul was now in Jerusalem and he had gone to the temple and was carrying out this vow with four other Jewish Christians. Near the end of his time of purification some Jews from Asia Minor who knew him only as a disturber of Judaism and who hated him, started a riot, which was designed to end in his being beaten to death. In the middle of the attempt to beat him to death, the Romans intervened, saved his life, and started to take him into the Roman barracks. While on the steps ascending Fort Antonia, Paul asked for and was granted permission to speak.

So Paul addressed his Jewish brothers in the Hebrew tongue. In Paul's [apology](#) he made three points. They were very simple points. He basically starts out by saying, in **blood**, in **training**, and in **zeal**, I was what you are. Then he made the second point, The Lord Jesus Christ intervened in my life as I was on my way to kill Christians. There is no other satisfactory explanation for the change that has taken place in my life.



So the apostle asked them to consider his life beforehand, then to consider the change that had taken place—from Christian killer to defender of Christianity. This was truly divine intervention.

The third point that he made was that he was sent by God to the Gentiles. It was God speaking to him and as a result of that, he has a ministry to them, which he would never have anticipated. Once Paul mentioned going to the Gentiles, the silent crowd erupted and began throwing off their clothes and throwing dust into the air.

So the Romans again rescue him and take him into the fort to beat the truth out of him. Paul tells them he is a Roman citizen and the Romans panic:

Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains. But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them. (Acts 22:29-30 NASB)

So [Claudius Lysias](#), who is the commander of this particular garrison of soldiers at Jerusalem, faces a dilemma. To preserve the life of this Roman citizen he should probably keep him in custody. And in order to keep him in custody, he should at least have charges. Yet these he has not yet discovered. His desire is to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews. He decides to assemble the Jewish Sanhedrin to examine Paul and determine what he was being accused of.

The word "**council**" here is the Greek word [sunedrion](#) which means: "**to sit together.**" The Sanhedrin was made up of high priests: the acting high priest, the former high priest, some special members of the family of the high priest; and also of elders. An elder was the head of a family or the head of a tribal family. It also included scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. So you had high priests, elders, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees. The high priest was the moderator or the president.

The Sanhedrin met in the hall of hewn stone, which was the place set aside for them—it was an amphitheater kind of forum-type place where the 70 members of the Sanhedrin sat together in judgment. Two people would sit there as secretaries taking down the count on the vote and the prisoner would stand in the middle.

During the past 25 or more years, the Sanhedrin had been confronted by the gospel at least five times. It deliberated anxiously over the growing popularity of Jesus after the raising of Lazarus, and determined He must die ([John 11:47-53](#)). In a hasty and illegal meeting, it determined that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy and must die ([Luke 22:66-71](#)). After the resurrection of our Lord, it arrested Peter and John and warned them not to preach in the name of Jesus any longer ([Acts 4:1-22](#)).

Shortly after that they arrested a larger group of the apostles, this time beating them to underscore their threats and warnings if they preached in the name of Jesus any more ([Acts 5:17-42](#)). Under pressure from the Hellenistic Jews, Stephen was tried on charges very similar to those made against Paul ([Acts 6:8—7:60](#)). The Sanhedrin hardly seemed to have reached a verdict, when the mob drug Stephen out and stoned him. Now, about 20 years later, Paul stands before the Sanhedrin. So this is the fifth time that the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, the brains, the wisdom of Israel, has been put in a position to have to evaluate the claims of Christ. In other words, they were really responsible!

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

So the next morning they bring Paul before the Sanhedrin, the high court of Israel. They had already rejected and condemned Christ, the Apostles, and Stephen. One last chance will now come and, in that sense, Israel's supreme hour has been reached, as Christ's chosen vessel the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, is to stand before them.

"Looking intently"—are from the Greek word [atenizo](#) which is a very strong word. It means ***"stare at, to gaze at, to fix your eyes on."*** Paul just stared at them, many of whom were people he knew. Some of them were the students of Gamaliel who had studied with him when he was younger. Many of them were Pharisees, and the camaraderie of the Pharisees was really amazing—they had been friends.

"Brethren"—this was not the proper way to address the Sanhedrin. The customary address to the Sanhedrin was a standardized form which began, ***"Rulers of Israel, and elders of the people..."*** Notice how Peter addresses them:

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people, (Acts 4:8 NASB)

Paul does not employ that, as he normally would, but instead puts himself right on a level with these rulers, no doubt because he once was one of them. He addresses them simply with the familiar term, ***"Brethren."*** That was probably seen as an offense to these Jews.

"I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day"—how can Paul say this when in his apology he said:

"I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, (Acts 22:4 NASB)

How could his conscience be clear when he had done so much that was wrong? Remember "context is king". And in this context, Paul's clear conscience is in reference to how he had ***"lived his life."*** The Greek verb translated ***"lived my life"*** is [politeuomai](#) [*pol-i-too'-a-my*] which means: ***"to conduct myself as a citizen."*** This expression is a rare one, used elsewhere only by Paul in [Philippians 1:27](#) (rendered ***"conduct yourselves"*** in the NASB). Its specific reference is to one's life as a citizen. And so when Paul claims to have lived with a clear conscience to this very day, he is specifically referring to a clear conscience with regard to his civil conduct. He is denying the charge leveled against him of bringing a Gentile into the exclusively Jewish section of the temple.

Let me say a word or two here about **conscience**: conscience means co-knowledge—it's that inner voice that tells us how to behave based on what we have learned. The Webster dictionary defines conscience as ***the sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions, or character together with a feeling of obligation to do right or be good. A faculty, power, or principle enjoining good acts.***

But do you understand that conscience does not always tell you to do what is right? **It tells you to do that which you have been told is right.** It tells us how to behave based on what we have learned. Your conscience may render you guilty when you're really not, or not render you guilty when you really are.

For a long time in Paul's life, his conscience was fouled up, and his conscience was telling him what he was doing was right i.e. killing Christians and trying to stomp our Christianity. Our conscience must be informed by God's Word or it will be a faulty guide. Paul was acting in good conscience when he persecuted the church, but he was terribly wrong because his conscience was informed more by his Jewish culture than by the Scriptures.

Today Christians may feel guilty because they are not tithing. This is only because they have been taught that they must tithe. But the New Testament nowhere commands the believer to tithe. Tithing is Jewish, not Christian. But if you are taught wrong, you will feel guilty for doing things that are not wrong. Giving is not compulsory—it's a matter of the heart.

Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 2 Corinthians 9:7 (NASB)

⁴³ Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; ⁴⁴ for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on." Mark 12:43-44 (NASB)

Many people do things that are wrong, however, they don't feel guilty because they have been taught they are right. The woman in India who takes her baby and throws it to drown in the Ganges River thinks she is serving her God. She looks at that god as some great fearful ogre who must be appeased.

If their charges were that Paul was conducting himself contrary to Jewish and Roman civil laws, Paul had no pangs of conscience on such matters in the least. Paul implies that there is no possible ground of complaint against him. This was certainly true. Yet it seemed to imply that there was no reason for this meeting at all, that it was absurd and ridiculous to have called this council together.

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

Ananias became high priest in A.D. 47. The Jewish high priesthood was a political appointment during Rome's occupation of Palestine. [Josephus](#) painted Ananias as a despicable person. He seized for his own use tithes that should have gone to the ordinary priests and gave large bribes to Romans and Jews. The emperor summoned him to Rome on charges of being involved in a bloody battle between Jews and Samaritans, but he escaped punishment. He was very wealthy and resorted to violence and even assassination to accomplish his ends. He was also very pro-Roman, and the Jews finally assassinated him in their uprising against Rome in A.D. 66, nine years after Paul stood before him.

Exactly why he had Paul struck we don't know. He was an egotistical tyrannical ruler who pretty much did what he wanted. Maybe it was because Paul didn't address the council in the proper manner, or perhaps because he said he had a clear conscience, meaning the charges against him were false. For whatever reason, he has Paul hit.

The word "**strike**" here is from the Greek word *tupto*. A primary verb (in a strengthened form); ***to "thump", that is, cudgel or pummel (properly with a stick, but in any case by repeated blows.)*** This is done with a fist or possibly one of the temple police could have hit him with their clubs right across the mouth.

Remember, Paul had just been badly beaten the day before by the angry mob. His face was probably sore and bruised. The blow must have both shocked Paul and hurt terribly. Here again we see Paul following in the steps of Jesus:

When He had said this, one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, "Is that the way You answer the high priest?" Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?" (John 18:22-23 NASB)

They were treating Paul just as they had treated His master.

Ananias was accusing Paul as a law-breaker, but he, the judge just broke the law by ordering him struck. It was specifically stated in passages like:

'You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly. (Leviticus 19:15 NASB)

An individual who stood before a court of law was to be judged justly on the issues. And the high priest has violated that. Jewish law said, *"He who strikes the cheek of an Israelite, strikes, as it were, the glory of God."*

Now notice Paul's response:

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

Paul here calls Ananias a stinking hypocrite. A *"whitewashed wall"* is one that has been painted to hide its imperfections so that it can pretend to be what it is not. Paul may be drawing from [Ezekiel 13:10-16](#).

This is certainly not the most tactful way for a prisoner to address a judge who holds the power of life and death. Don't try this the next time you go to court. Let me ask you something. Is this a biblical response? Is this what Jesus would do? I'm not asking if you like Paul's response, but was it biblical?

"But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. (Matthew 5:39 NASB)

Paul wasn't slapped but the principle is the same. Paul didn't turn the other cheek.

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; (1 Peter 2:21-23 NASB)

Paul, is not acting very Christlike here. Jesus, when He was reviled, *"He did not revile in return"*. "When He was threatened, *"He uttered no threats."* So I guess it is possible for an apostle to lose his temper. And the fact that the Apostle Paul was a great man is not affected by the fact that he lost his temper one time. So when we look at an incident like this, we should avoid immediately saying, no, it couldn't happen to an apostle. An apostle is simply a man—they were not sinless. Peter is evidence of that.

Calling the high priest a *"whitewashed wall,"* Paul was laying stress upon the hypocrisy that characterized this man. Paul was saying, in effect, I walk before the Law blamelessly, yet you, you religious hypocrite, hit me, breaking the very Law you are required to uphold. *"God is going to strike you"*—God is going to punish you for sitting at the seat of authority in the law and violating the law. That was prophetic because it wasn't long until that's exactly what happened. God took his (Ananias) life—as I said earlier, he was murdered.

But the bystanders said, "Do you revile God's high priest?"⁵ And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.'" (Acts 23:4-5 NASB)

Paul angrily blurts out, then someone questions his response and Paul immediately admitted his fault. Paul is instantly repentant, for he recognizes that he is in the wrong. He apologizes and then he quotes Scripture:

"You shall not curse God, nor curse a ruler of your people. (Exodus 22:28 NASB)

Though the high priest had no regard for the law, Paul did. He knew the words and the intent of Exodus 22:28 as he cited to those nearby. To revile God's representative was to be seen as reviling God. So Paul apologizes. Now, that's Christ-like! He informed them that he had not known that this man was the High Priest; otherwise he would not have done it.

Paul's prophetic curse, given in hasty anger, had violated a basic biblical precept lived out by David in his dealings with Saul. Though an officeholder dishonors the office through his conduct, one does not have liberty to dishonor him ([1 Sam 24:6](#); [26:9-11](#)).

For all of Paul's freedom from the law, Paul was still a man who endeavored to live in accordance with the precepts and standards set by the law, and thus he knew he was obliged to show respect for this man, Ananias, not for his personal piety,

but due to his position.

Paul had already written the Book of Romans. He wrote it from Corinth before he ever got to Jerusalem. And in the Book of Romans, he said this to Christians who were living under Nero's rule:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor. (Romans 13:1-7 NASB)

The Paul who taught the saints to live in submission to God-given authorities, even the wicked rulers, would do so himself, even with regard to this evil and hypocritical high priest.

Paul acknowledged his sin in speaking thusly, but he also claimed it was a sin of ignorance. He did not know this man was the high priest. There are some who would doubt Paul's words. I have no doubt that Paul was both sincere and honest in his claim of ignorance. I do not know why he did not know who the man was, but there are many possible reasons. Many New Testament scholars feel that it was an ironical accusation of him that he knew he was the high priest, but he was so different from what a high priest should be in Israel, who should be a model of fairness and equity. How could a person like this, so wicked, so notoriously evil be a high priest in Israel? I guess that's possible. Some other possibilities are:

Paul had not been in Jerusalem for a long time, nor had he been there long this time. Why would he know who the high priest was, or, better yet, why would he know what he looked like? This seems to have been a hastily called meeting, and may not have been nearly as orderly and formal. Was Ananias dressed casually or sitting in some seat other than his normal place? Some think Paul had bad eyesight. Whatever the reason, Paul did not know who he was speaking to, and thus sinned in ignorance.

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

I don't think we should assume that what is said in this verse happened immediately. There was probably a lengthy discussion that took place. Paul's understanding issued from ensuing discussion. Paul recognized there were a number who would in fact agree with his main proposition which was **the resurrection from the dead**.

Remember, the Sanhedrin was composed of priests, Sadducees, Pharisees, scribes, elders. For the most part, the priestly families, the high priestly families were Sadducees.

The Pharisees believed in the minutia of the oral law. The Sadducees accepted only the written law. The Pharisees were Calvinists. They believed in absolute sovereignty. The Sadducees were Armenians. They didn't know it yet, because those guys hadn't come along. But the Sadducees believed in free will. The Pharisees believed in the doctrine of predestination. So they used to always argue about predestination and free will.

The Pharisees believed in angels, spirits, and the resurrection; the Sadducees did not. So here is the point that divides these two and it's the point at issue. Did the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Messiah of Israel, rise from the dead? The whole issue, really, was the resurrection. **Paul preached the resurrection**. That's what people got upset about. He preached that Jesus was alive, that Jesus had talked with him twice, and this is what infuriated everybody.

After Pentecost and the preaching of the apostles commenced, the Sadducees took the leading role in opposing the apostles and Christianity. After all, the gospel was based upon the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. They could not allow such teaching to go unchallenged, especially when they were accused of instigating the death of Jesus. On the other hand, the Pharisees seemed to gradually become less aggressive in their opposition to the apostles.

Paul, who saw these proceedings as having become weighed down by inessentials, was genuinely concerned to establish the truth of the resurrection, and of heavenly beings speaking to men, and of his defense of them. That was, after all, what his testimony had been all about. If he was to be condemned, let it be for something worthwhile, something that will enable Claudias Lysias to recognize that what he is being charged with is simply a subject on which the Jews themselves were in dispute. For the trial to become a dispute about Jewish teaching would strongly aid his case.

So he points out that what he is really being condemned for is something that is dearly held by a number of them, the hope of the resurrection. For every genuine Pharisee lived his life with only one final aim in view, that he might attain eternal life and the resurrection from the dead.

We need to recognize what was central in Paul's thinking, the resurrection from the dead. Paul's confession focuses on that aspect of the gospel that will be central to his apologetic throughout his trial. It tells the truth about the ultimate reason for his arrest by the Jews. For Paul and Luke, resurrection, especially the resurrection of Messiah Jesus, is the key issue that determines the nature of the continuity and discontinuity between Jews and Christians as part of the true people of God. Hope in the resurrection of the dead, literally, ***"hope and the resurrection of the dead."***

Paul finds himself on trial because of the Messiah's resurrection and the new realities it introduced. For if Jesus had not risen from the dead, he could not have appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road, or in the temple, and commissioned him to take the gospel to the Gentiles ([Acts 22:15, 21](#)). Paul would, then, not have promulgated a message or lived a lifestyle that his fellow Jews would have opposed.

As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. (Acts 23:7-8 NASB)

Suddenly the focus of the court shifted from Paul to the chief doctrinal differences which were being debated between the two schools of belief.

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

The Pharisees found themselves in a most interesting position: they found that they had more in common with Paul than they did with the Sadducees. And so a number of the Pharisees had to acknowledge, at least in principle, that what Paul claimed and taught was, by their own system of belief, believable.

The debate resulted in a partial verdict. Some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party said, ***"We find nothing wrong with this man"***.

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

Claudius, the Roman cohort, had another riot on his hands! He had failed in his quest to get to the bottom of the first riot and discover why Paul had been accused. For the third time he has to rescue Paul from the mob and once more take him to the Roman barracks.

He must have been in some despair. Here he was stuck with this prisoner, who was a Roman citizen and therefore difficult to deal with. And it was apparent that none of his opponents knew what to charge him with. He was having to hold him without charge and risk any consequences.

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

Things didn't seem to have gone to well, but one person was satisfied with the way that things were going—that night the risen Lord stood by Paul, and encouraged him. The word ***"courage"*** here is the Greek [tharseo](#) [thar-seh'-o] which means:

“to have courage, to be of good cheer or comfort.” Can you imagine how comforting it would be for Jesus to show up and say, **“Be of good comfort, you have witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.”** Believer, do you understand that God is a God of comfort?

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 NASB)

Look at what Paul said to the Philippians:

Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:5-7 NASB)

Believer, the Lord Jesus Christ is here, He cares about you, and He is the God of all comfort.

The fact that Paul is now a prisoner may appear to us as a hindrance to the spread of the Good News. But remember God is in control. Paul was now such a marked man, and so intensely hated by many Jews in many cities, that wherever he went his life was in danger. So much so that some followed him around with the aim of killing him. This being the case with him directly under the protection of Roman soldiers, with his companions able to visit him freely, is truly a blessing of God.

Remember what Paul wrote:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28 NASB)

We see this fleshed out in Paul’s life and you would see it in yours if you trust Him.

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