

Study 35: Acts 23

Introduction

Paul appeared before the Sanhedrin, and stood where Jesus, Peter and John, and then the twelve together stood. However things did not go his way, as they had when the other apostles appeared there.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

What does Paul mean “Men and brethren”?

Why did the High Priest react to Paul so quickly?

Why does Paul not know that Ananias was the High Priest?

How does Paul divide the meeting?

How was Paul feeling?

How did the Jews react to Paul?

The message from Lysias

How does Felix react to the letter?

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *Jesus appeared to Paul and gave him assurance. What assurance do we have from Christ?*
- *How does God reveal these assurances to us, and how do we access them?*

Read chapter 24 in preparation for next week

Notes for study 35: Acts chapter 23

Introduction

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Timing: *When did these events occur?*

The period of the chapter covers only a few days, still in AD 58, around the time of Pentecost.

Content: *What are the major events?*

Paul before the Sanhedrin, he causes division between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, Jesus appears in a vision in the night – you will also go to Rome. The plot to kill Paul, Paul is sent to Caesarea, Letter from Claudius Lysias to Felix.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Paul, the Sanhedrin, Paul's nephew, Claudius Lysias.

Body of the Study

What does Paul mean “Men and brethren”?

As Paul addresses the Sanhedrin, he uses the term “...*men and brethren*...” (23:1). This may just be addressing the Jews as “brethren”, and this is the sense in which the term is used in 28:21, and also in which Ananias addresses Paul (9:17 & 22:13). At that time, Paul had not yet become a christian, (since his sins had not yet been washed away – 22:16), but Ananias was a well regarded Jew (22:12), and so was Paul, who was still Saul at that time.

Two of Jesus' disciples (at the time of Christ, 25 years before) were members of the Sanhedrin – Joseph of Arimathea (Lk 23:50-53; Jn 19:38), and Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-2; 19:39-40). So, if these two men were still members of the Sanhedrin, then they were not only brethren as Jews, but were also brothers in Christ. The men still being members of the Sanhedrin would be unlikely for several reasons.

It had been 25 years since the death of Jesus (AD 33 to AD 58). In that time, other things being equal, many of the Sanhedrin who were made up from *the elders of Israel* would have died and been replaced by others. These men were *elders* of Israel 25 years before this time, and if they were still alive they would now be quite old men.

Secondly, with their conviction regarding Jesus, and the unfolding of the events in the early part of the church (covered in the first few chapters of the book of Acts), it is almost untenable that these men could have remained in the position of members of the Sanhedrin, condoning the persecution of christians – but it is possible that they still remained *secret disciples*. To be secret disciples during Jesus' three year earthly ministry is one thing, but to *remain* such after Jesus resurrection declared Him to be the Son of God (Rom 1:4) is quite another – especially when the fruition of that fact resulted in persecution of the christians. If they had any conviction (and they must have, because they took the body of Jesus and buried Him), then they would have resigned and stood down from the Sanhedrin.

Thirdly, the other Sanhedrin members would have eventually become aware of these men, and forced them to stand aside or be cast into prison as Paul had inflicted on others.

The Jews had still not come to the truth of the charges against Paul. As far as they were concerned, he had taken Trophimus into the temple. When Paul commenced to explain the situation, he was cut off before he could finish the explanation (22:22). Paul was most likely determined to be guilty before his trial, and to say “...*I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day...*” (23:1 NKJV) was tantamount to saying that he brought Greeks into the Temple *in good conscience*. This would have been anathema to any Jew.

Why did the High Priest react to Paul so quickly?

Ananias was a High Priest from AD 48-59¹. He was deposed by Agrippa 2 in AD 59 (just a year after the time described here) because of his treatment of the lesser priests and his forceful taking of the tithes. A typical Sadducee, he was both wealthy and unscrupulous. Filling the office of High Priest was to satisfy his selfish and political ends. He would send out his servants to the threshing floors to take the tithes by force, whilst at the same time defrauding the inferior priests of what was due to them often leaving them to die of starvation. His greed and unscrupulous behaviour became a by-word.

Ananias had previously been accused of complicity in the bitter quarrels and disputes between the Jews and the Samaritans. He was sent to stand trial at Rome, and was found not guilty due to the influence of Herod Agrippa 2. Ananias returned to Jerusalem to resume the office of High Priest. Jonathan had been made High Priest in Ananias' absence, and was soon murdered at the order of Felix².

Ananias had a reputation and a background. His interest was self centred, not truth and justice. He wanted to "exercise his authority" and "show Paul who's boss", "...*And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by to strike him on the mouth...*" (23:2 NKJV).

Paul said that he had done everything "*in good conscience*". This must have come as a stark contrast to Ananias, and he (Ananias) may have taken it as a personal attack. Paul was standing before the Sanhedrin, essentially as a criminal of the worst type for polluting the Temple – and yet he says that he has done everything throughout his life in good conscience.

Paul reacted by replying "...*God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!...*" (23:3 NIV). His prophecy came true, he was executed for his pro-Roman allegiances.

Why does Paul not know that Ananias was the High Priest?

Probably the men who hit Paul, then criticised him for his action "...*And those who stood by said "Do you revile God's high priest?"...*" (23:4 NKJV). Paul responded that "...*I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest...*" (23:5 NKJV). There were 28 different High Priests who had occupied the office between AD 37 and AD 70, so changes of office were quite common. Paul had been away from Jerusalem for most of the previous 25 years. Having come to Jerusalem after quite lengthy absences. On this occasion, he had been in Jerusalem only a few days. He had seen Caiaphas (22:5) and probably thought he was still High Priest.

It is also probable that Ananias was not wearing the normal robes worn by the High Priest, nor sitting in the normal place of the High Priest in the centre of the circle of the Sanhedrin. The meeting was (at least partially) impromptu. Some writers have thought that Paul did not regard him as the *legitimate* High Priest, but rather as an *imposter*. His behaviour would have led to such a conclusion, and imposters in the office were far from uncommon.

Paul acknowledged that the Law required not to speak evil of the leaders "...*for it is written, "You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people"...*" (23:5 NKJV, quoting Ex 22:28). His accusation towards Ananias of being "*a whitewashed wall*" was exactly correct. He was underneath corrupt, but put on the exterior surface of one who was righteous. He had been described as *a thug sitting on the judge's bench*, and he was as corrupt as they come. God was indeed going to strike him, and he was very soon after removed from office, and assassinated by the Zealots during the destruction of Jerusalem.

How does Paul divide the meeting?

Paul was very familiar with the background of the Sanhedrin, and most likely would have still known many of them from his study under Gamaliel 25 years earlier. He *knew* about the mix of Sects, and used this for his advantage "...*Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a*

¹ NIVBC

² Extracted from Reese, pp xv and xvi. Most of the material & background came from Josephus.
Study of Acts (Revised 2007) by Graeme Offer

Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead."... " (23:6 NIV).

- Paul sided with the Pharisees
- Was called in question because of the hope and resurrection of the dead

Immediately the Sanhedrin was divided, and they disputed amongst themselves. In fact it was stronger than just “disputing”, but rather “arguing heatedly” (NASB), “fighting it out”, “fighting back and forth fiercely” – quite likely the yelling match had deteriorated into fistfights. There was no longer the likelihood of a unanimous vote against him – as was the case with Stephen, and so much so that some of the Pharisaic scribes stood up and argued that “...we find no evil in this man...” (23:9 NKJV).

Similar to the advice of Gamaliel (5:34-39), “...the scribes who were of the Pharisees’ party arose and protested, saying... “if an angel has spoken to him, then let us not fight against God”... ” (23:9 NKJV). This would have been another red rag to the Sadducees who didn’t believe in angels or spirits.

The great dissension continued, and the commander was afraid that Paul was about to get torn to pieces, so he intervened and “...commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks...” (23:10 NKJV). This was for Paul’s safe custody (again).

How was Paul feeling?

The very next night, the Lord appeared to Paul in a vision. Paul must have been feeling very low, and not sure if this was the end. He seemed to be facing death at every turn of event, and must have been expecting to be taken and stoned at anytime.

Jesus assured Paul to “...be of good cheer...for you must also go to Rome to testify of me...” (23:11). The promise to Paul was not that he would escape the imprisonment, but only that he would eventually go to Rome.

How did the Jews react to Paul?

“...When it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath...” (23:12 NKJV). They were probably Sadducees who were driven by the events of the day before. They were planning to kill him, and had made an oath “...saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul...” (23:12 NKJV). There were more than forty men who had formed the plot.

Paul’s life was in great danger. The reaction of many of the Sanhedrin in supporting the plot is interesting. These were the leaders of Israel, who were supporting such a plot if indeed they were not actually behind it! The Sanhedrin was to call for Paul, and on the way to the meeting, he was to be intercepted and murdered. “...Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here...” (23:15 NIV).

News of the plot against Paul had spread around Jerusalem, “...And when Paul’s sister’s son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul...” (23:16 NKJV). Had Paul’s nephew (through God’s providence) not uncovered the plot it would almost certainly have been successful, and Lysias would have met their request in order to gain more information regarding Paul. To this point, the commander still has not been able to ascertain what Paul had done that had led to such a violent reaction from the Jews.

Apart from this verse, we know very little of Paul’s family relationships. Where was Paul’s sister? If she was in Jerusalem, why did Paul stay with Mnason? What was his nephew doing in Jerusalem? Where did he hear of the plot? Paul had only been there a very short time, but in that time his nephew was aware of Paul’s presence in Jerusalem, and knew where to find him after he heard of the plot to kill him.

After hearing the message, Lysias prepared 470 men to leave at 9 PM (under cover of darkness) to take Paul to safer custody in Caesarea.

The message from Lysias

Luke does not give us an exact rendition of the letter, but notes that it goes “...*after this manner...*”

- The author – Claudius Lysias
- Greetings
- Explanation of the facts:
 - Arrested by the Jews
 - About to be killed
 - I rescued him
 - Learned he was a Roman
 - Sought to find the charge against him
 - He was accused over questions of Jewish Law – even by the Sanhedrin
 - None of the accusations deserved death or even imprisonment
 - I learned about a plot to kill him
 - I have sent him to you immediately
 - I have instructed the accusers to bring the charges to you.

This sounds like Claudius Lysias was trying to dodge his responsibilities and pass the buck to Felix. But remember that Paul was essentially in imminent danger in Jerusalem, and the safest course was to get him out of there. As “a politician” Lysias would have been as much concerned with maintaining peace in Jerusalem as he was for the rights of the prisoner.

Besides that, Felix was the Governor. He resided in Caesarea, and he was the highest official who could deal with Paul’s case – if indeed there was anything that could be legitimately brought against him.

How does Felix react to the letter?

The party left around 9 PM, with 670 people to escort Paul. The journey was 50 km, to Antipatris and would have taken the rest of the night and into the early morning. “...*The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks...*” (23:32 NKJV). The horsemen escort continued the further 60 kms to Caesarea. Paul had been escorted well away from the danger, and the soldiers returned to Jerusalem from Antipatris.

It would have been late in the day by the time they reached Caesarea, and the large procession of 70 horsemen would have attracted some attention (to say the least).

“...*When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him...*” (23:33 NKJV). The response from Felix was rather brief “...*he asked what province he was from...*” (23:34 NKJV). The question was asked to ascertain whether or not he had jurisdiction in the matter, or whether he needed to consult the ruler of another province before (or if) he tried Paul. In this case, Cilicia, Judea and Phoenicia were all part of the Roman province of Syria, and therefore Felix did have jurisdiction in Paul’s case.³

Felix, learning that he was able to hear the matter, decided judiciously to wait to hear what the accusers had to say. “...*I will hear you when your accusers also have come...*” (23:35 NKJV). Paul would be given a fresh and thorough hearing, but first he must have something to be accused of before he could defend himself.

There would have been a guardroom in Herod’s palace, that would be appropriate to hold Paul securely until a trial could be held.

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³ Reese, p 835.