

## Paul's Defense and Transfer to Roman Headquarters

### Acts 23

Acts 22:30: *"The next day, because [the Roman commander] wanted to know for certain why [Paul] was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them."*

Acts 23:1-10: *"Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, 'Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.'<sup>2</sup> And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.<sup>3</sup> Then Paul said to him, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?'<sup>4</sup> And those who stood by said, 'Do you revile God's high priest?'<sup>5</sup> Then Paul said, 'I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"*

<sup>6</sup> *But when Paul perceived that 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; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!'<sup>7</sup> And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided.<sup>8</sup> For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both.<sup>9</sup> Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, 'We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.'*

<sup>10</sup> *Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest they might pull Paul to pieces, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks."*

### Background Notes

In Acts 22 Paul was given the opportunity to witness to the Jewish mob that had attacked him and tried to kill him in the Temple courts. At first the Jews listened to Paul, but when he mentioned God's grace to the Gentiles, once again the mob went into an uproar and shouted for Paul's death.

In order to appease the mob and find out why the Jews wanted Paul's death, the Roman military commander ordered Paul to be "examined" by scourging – he was to be tortured to obtain the truth. At this point Paul revealed that he was a Roman citizen. Scourging - or even binding - a Roman citizen before he was proven to be guilty of some crime was illegal, and this action would not look good in this commander's record, to say the least.

So in order to determine why the Jews were in such an uproar and so intent on Paul's death, the commander decided to bring Paul before the Jewish Sanhedrin, the governing council of the Jews. Thus Paul had an opportunity to witness to the leaders of Israel as he stood before the Sanhedrin.

Paul testified, *“Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day”* (v1). This was an honest statement, because even when Paul was persecuting the early Christians, he thought he was doing God’s will. Then the high priest Ananias ordered a couple of his subordinates to (illegally) strike Paul on the mouth. Paul then called him a “white-washed wall” - meaning that he appeared to be righteous on the outside, but inwardly he was corrupt.

Paul did not realize that this man was the ruling high priest, and when he was informed of this he immediately apologized, quoting Exodus 22:28: *“You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.”* Why Paul did not recognize the high priest is debatable. Perhaps the high priest was not wearing his official robes, since the Sanhedrin had assembled on such short notice. Or perhaps Paul may have had poor eyesight.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Believers should be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

In Matthew 10:16, when the Lord sent His disciples out with the gospel of the kingdom, He said to them, *“Behold I send you out as sheep amidst the wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”* This verse certainly has an application for us today. As we preach and teach the gospel, we need to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” – wise in avoiding danger and compromising situations, and wise in seeing and striking where the enemy’s position is weak and vulnerable. But we should be harmless in our way of life and faith. Honesty and integrity should characterize our dealings with people. Believers should be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

This principle is illustrated in the way Paul handled himself before the Sanhedrin (v6-10). Paul perceived that some of the members of the Sanhedrin were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, and he knew that these religious sects did not agree. The Sadducees did not believe in angels or the resurrection of the body, but the Pharisees did. Paul saw this point of vulnerability in the Sanhedrin and he struck at this area of weakness by mentioning the resurrection of the dead (v6).

As a result of Paul’s strategic strike, he caused a division in the Sanhedrin. He even got the Pharisees to defend his innocence (v9)! But notice - throughout this heated discussion Paul was as harmless as a dove. He didn’t shout, and he didn’t manipulate the truth. He was “wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove.”

We too need to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves when we’re dealing with the opposition. Here’s an example. In the field of science there are many theories that don’t line up with the Bible. Every time we see vulnerable weaknesses in these theories (and there are many), or when the theories and those who hold them are inconsistent (as often happens), we should point this out. But we should confront the inconsistencies in a wise and knowledgeable manner - not reacting defensively, or with scorn or vitriol. And we should confidently but respectfully make their inconsistencies public. 1 Peter 3:15-16 says, *“...always be prepared to give and answer... with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience... so those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.”* Believers should be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

## 2. Believers should look for the way of escape.

Acts 23:11-35: *“But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.”* <sup>12</sup> *And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.* <sup>13</sup> *Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy.* <sup>14</sup> *They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, “We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul.* <sup>15</sup> *Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near.”*

<sup>16</sup> *So when Paul’s sister’s son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.* <sup>17</sup> *Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, “Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him.”* <sup>18</sup> *So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, “Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you.”*

<sup>19</sup> *Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside, and asked privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?”* <sup>20</sup> *And he said, “The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him.* <sup>21</sup> *But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you.”*

<sup>22</sup> *So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, “Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me.”* <sup>23</sup> *And he called for two centurions, saying, “Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night; <sup>24</sup> and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor.”* <sup>25</sup> *He wrote a letter in the following manner:*

<sup>26</sup> *Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings.* <sup>27</sup> *This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman.* <sup>28</sup> *And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council.* <sup>29</sup> *I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains.* <sup>30</sup> *And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell.*

<sup>31</sup> *Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris.* <sup>32</sup> *The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks.* <sup>33</sup> *When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him.* <sup>34</sup> *And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia, <sup>35</sup> he said, “I will hear you when your accusers also have come.” And he commanded him to be kept in Herod’s Praetorium.”*

The phrase “way of escape” in our doctrinal point comes from 1 Corinthians 10:13: *“No temptation or test has overtaken you except such as is common to man. But God is faithful who will not allow you to be tempted or tested beyond what you are able, but with the temptation or test will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”*

The Greek word that's used for "*temptation*" or "*test*" in this verse can refer either to *temptations to do evil*, or to *tests of our faith* that come our way. In either case, God promises a way of escape so that we do not have to sin, or we do not have to fail the test of faith. In some situations, it's conceivable that the way of escape will be martyrdom. But we should always look for the "way of escape" that God promises to provide.

Paul was not afraid of persecution, but he did not suffer needlessly. He looked for a way of escape, and took the way that God provided. Paul used his Roman citizenship as a way of escape from scourging (Acts 22). In Acts 23 God provided a way of escape in the most unusual way. A plot was formed to ambush Paul on his second proposed visit to the Sanhedrin. More than forty men bound themselves by oath not to eat or drink until they had killed the apostle Paul. (I wonder how many of these men cheated on their vow!) But Paul's nephew heard of the plot, and told Paul.

Paul saw the way of escape, and he asked a centurion to take his nephew to tell the commander about the plot. As a result, the commander arranged to have Paul sent that very night, under heavy guard, to Caesarea, the Roman provincial capital on the Mediterranean coast. Paul was protected by an armed guard of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen – an amazing amount of security for one man! (I wonder how the forty starving men who took the vow viewed this unexpected turn of events!)

In the letter that Commander Lysias sent with Paul to Caesarea, he took quite a bit of credit for himself - and for obvious reasons he didn't say a word about almost scourging Paul, a Roman citizen. Through it all, Paul was safely delivered to Caesarea - all because Paul's nephew overheard a plot and Paul saw a way of escape from the evil plans of the conspirators and the Sanhedrin.

Paul took the way of escape when it was presented to him, and so should we. Believers should look for the way of escape.

## Practical Application

### Remember - the Lord stands by you!

On the night following Paul's arrest, the Lord stood by Paul and said, "*Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome*" (v11). What an encouragement the Lord's presence and the Lord's message must have been for the apostle Paul!

We, too, can be confident of the Lord's presence with us in times of crisis. This should be a tremendous encouragement to us! We may not see the Lord physically, but we know that He is standing there with us. Why? Because He promised, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you*" (Hebrews 13:5).

Are you going through a crisis in your life right now? Are you going through a very tough test of your faith, and you want stand firm in the lord, and do the right thing? Remember – you're not alone in your time of crisis. ***The Lord stands by you!***