

## PAUL'S APPEARANCE BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN (Acts 23)

For his own protection Paul had been arrested and taken into the Roman military quarters ... out of sight and out of touch from his fellow Jews who wished to do him serious harm. The following day, the Roman commander convened a court to which he insisted chief priests and the Sanhedrin must attend (Acts 22:30). ... The (Great) Sanhedrin was the supreme court of the Jewish people, consisting of the high priest and seventy men of the highest religious calibre in Jerusalem.

As Paul stood in front of the Sanhedrin, they had already pre-determined his guilt. Nevertheless, he assured them he was not in any shape or form an insurrectionist or a blasphemer. He was not against the Jews, or Judaism, the law, or the temple, in fact, he was the complete opposite (v.1). The high priest sprang to his feet and ordered the officials to thump Paul on the mouth, - so much for a fair trial! Either the officials availed themselves of the opportunity, or they did not, but Paul informed the religious rascal Ananias God was going to strike *him* (v.3). It was a courtroom ready to explode ... and when Paul described the high priest as a 'whited wall', it became even more incendiary.

Paul had been a member of this Jewish elite, the Sanhedrin, and he knew how they worked. He knew how they would haul in their victim, having already decided the judgment they would pass ... it was how they had dealt with Jesus, Simon the first martyr, and it was how they were planning to deal with Paul. However, Paul was qualified 'to play them at their own game'.

Was he right to insult the high priest by calling him a 'whited wall'? It probably was not his best moment for it would have incited the situation further and given the Sanhedrin the perfect opportunity to react. Verbal abuse, - especially when it is personal, - is not the best way to win a discussion. Even if Ananias looked like a 'whited wall' and acted as *thick* as a 'whited wall', it would have been wiser for Paul not to have brought it to the high priest's attention. In fact, it was also insulting to the bystanders who were watching and listening (v.4). It had the potential to undermine Paul's case. Also, Revilest thou God's high priest? (v.4) ...the Greek word for 'revile' means cursing, mocking, insulting, abusive ... it was a word Paul would have benefitted from *not* using! It had the potential to make a bad situation worse.

However, Paul quickly recoiled, and apologised, for he recognised he was out of order because the Law of Moses taught submission to the 'judge', the leader, the high priest (no matter who he was), <sup>De. 17:8</sup> If there arise a matter too hard for

thee in judgment ... then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place ...<sup>9</sup> And thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days, and enquire; and they shall shew thee the sentence of judgment:<sup>10</sup> And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the LORD shall choose shall shew thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee:<sup>11</sup> According to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew thee, to the right hand, nor to the left.<sup>12</sup> And the man that ... will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the LORD thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die ... Paul was wrong to speak the way he did, for he violated the law, and he would have known it. ... Whether the high priest was what Paul said he was, he should not have said it! ... Neither should the high priest have given the order to smack Paul ... but ‘two wrongs don’t make a right’! ... To Paul’s credit, in humility he quickly admitted he was wrong (v.5). There was no such apology from the high priest however.

It is also possible Paul might not have been able to identify the high priest, perhaps because of poor eyesight he seems to have had ... maybe as a consequence of the bright light he saw on the road to Damascus? When he wrote to the church in Galatia, he said, *Gal. 4:15* I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me. ... *6:11* Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand. ... He might not have been able to see too well, still though, he was wrong to speak the way he did.

Having gathered himself again, realising there were Sadducees present, as well as the Pharisees, he ‘dipped’ into his defence the issue of the resurrection of the dead (v.6). There immediately followed an uproar between the two factions for the Pharisees believed in resurrection, and the Sadducees did not. Paul, a former Pharisee, was fully aware of this and after the two groups had finished their arguing, the Pharisees sided with Paul, We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God (v.9).

Standing on the outside watching in was the Roman commander and he saw how the heightened tension presented such potential for violence and the mauling by the crowds of Paul, he speedily ended the proceedings and returned Paul *into* the barracks (v.10). ... For the second time in a matter of days, God had used the pagan Romans to protect and rescue His servant.

Then, in the quietness of the prison cell into which Paul was placed, the glorified Lord Jesus Himself spoke words of encouragement, Be of good cheer,

Paul [*comfort*] for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem [*conscientious*], so must thou bear witness also at Rome [*challenge*] (v.11). ... The Lord had yet more work for Paul, and he could be confident he would be sustained through every crisis. ... Rom. 8:33 Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? ... 34 Who is he that condemneth? ... 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ... 37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. ... The same Lord who met him on the road to Damascus comes now to Paul in the prison ... What a great encouragement ... God was with him. Jesus stood before him, giving him the strength to continue.

The devil had not given up though for he set upon another course of evil activity. He inspired more than forty of the Jewish malcontents to swear they would murder Paul. That was their *modus operandi* (v.14)! Reckoning they needed more help, they held a meeting with the high priest and members of his council, and they made no secret of their evil intention, 14 We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul. 15 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. ... By sharing their wicked scheme with the Sanhedrin and the high priest, they were implicating them in their heinous conniving. ... And the high priest and the Sanhedrin were so corrupt they had no problem becoming involved! They sent a message to the Roman commander asking for Paul to be brought to appear in a specially convened courtroom, with the intention of these forty-plus ambushing and murdering Paul.

However, God is in control, and He looks after His own. The news of their scheming was brought to the attention of Paul's nephew, who went to the Roman barracks, visited Paul in the cell and told him, who then reported what he had heard to one of the centurions (v.16,17). The centurion immediately brought Paul's nephew, - by the hand (v.19), - to his commanding officer (Claudius Lysias) and relayed the news of the plot, pleading with the officer not to fall into the trap of acquiescing to the Jewish request (v.18-21). Probably for the commander's own convenience, he would not have wanted any needless insurrection, so he ordered, - under a strict code of secrecy (v.22), - two centurions with two hundred Roman soldiers to whisk Paul away out of Jerusalem, - on his own mount (v.24), - sixty miles away up the coast to Caesarea at nine o'clock in the evening when it was dark, - "Get him out of here as fast as you can ... and take another seventy cavalry soldiers and two hundred spearmen with their javelins ... guard Paul with your lives ... and bring

him safely into the custody of Felix, the Roman governor of Judea and Samaria, ... How relieved Claudius Lysias was to pass his 'problem' on to someone else!

Commanding Officer Claudius Lysias duly sent Governor Felix the correspondence describing how he had rescued Paul from the marauding Jewish mobs, and subsequently upheld the peace in the city ... and how Paul was charged with various Jewish crimes which did not fall within Roman jurisdiction ... and hence, most excellent Governor Felix, I'm sending him to you (v. 25-30).

So, that evening, they sneaked Paul out, - accompanied by over four hundred infantry soldiers and cavalry, - and they arrived in Antipatris, a little village thirty-five miles outside Jerusalem in the Judean hillside (v.31). Once they arrived, in safer Gentile territory, the four hundred soldiers returned to Jerusalem while the seventy cavalry soldiers continued to Caesarea with Paul (v. 32,33).

On arrival, Felix read the letter from the army commander Claudius Lysias, and received Paul into his custody. In fact, he stipulated Paul stay with him, in the official governor's residence (v.35) ... which was actually the magnificent palace Herod had built for himself some years previously. ... Despite what was happening, God was good to Paul having taken out from under the devious plots and plans of the Jewish leaders into the safety of the foreign Roman invaders ... to taking him outside the city with a heavily armed escort of over four hundred and seventy well-equipped and professional soldiers ... into the palatial house of the Roman governor ... kept safely under heavy guard. ... Indeed, God is good. Throughout everything Paul was going through, the Lord did not abandon Him, - He even visited him (v.11) in the cell ... and He continued to work miracles in Paul's life during these frighteningly uncertain circumstances. Indeed, He *does* do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think (Eph. 3:20).