

# THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An Exposition

by

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

In the last verse of the preceding chapter we read that the chief captain commanded that the chief priests and all the council should gather together. When this was accomplished, Paul was brought down and set before them.

We divide the chapter into four sections:

- I. Paul before the Sanhedrim** (Verses 1-10).
- II. The vision of the Lord** (Verse 11).
- III. The conspiracy against Paul and its discovery.**
- IV. Paul taken to Cesarea** (Verses 23-30).

### **I. Paul before the Sanhedrim.**

**“And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth. Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law? And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God’s high priest? Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people. But when Paul perceived that the 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: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both. And there arose a great cry: and the scribes that were of the Pharisees’ part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God. And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them and to bring him into the castle”** (Verses 1-10).

For the last time, the Jewish council is mentioned in this book. Three times before the Sanhedrim had been called together in connection with those who believed in the Lord Jesus (2:5; 5:21 and 6:12-15). Peter and John, the twelve Apostles and Stephen, had to appear before the Sanhedrim and now Paul had to stand in the presence of the same body.

Looking straight at the council, Paul did not wait for the formalities connected with the proceedings, but addressed the gathered Sanhedrim as men and brethren. This action shows that he did not consider himself at all an accused criminal.

And strange are the words with which he opened his defence:

**“I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.”**

In this he made a public declaration of his righteousness, which reminds us of his confession as a Pharisee (Philippians 3:4-6). This self-justification shows that he was not acting under the leading of the Holy Spirit. This bold language resulted in stirring up the anger of the high priest Ananias, who commanded that the bystanders should smite the Apostle on the mouth. And Paul was not slow to reply with a harsh word, calling the high priest **“a whited wall”** and demanding of God to smite him.

No doubt the high priest was indeed a **“whited wall”** and fully deserved the judgment from God. But did Paul in speaking thus show the meekness of Him, whose servant he was? If Paul had been in the power of the Spirit and in the knowledge that he was doing the Lord’s will, he would not have opened his mouth, nor acted in this hasty manner. However, the utterance he made was fulfilled, for some time later Ananias was assassinated.

Paul recovered himself, professing that he did not know the high priest, who had commanded the smiting. The words - **“I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest”** contain an apparent difficulty. The Apostle, so well acquainted with the customs of the council, must have known the high priest, both by the position he occupied and by the dress. Some have suggested that the Apostle was afflicted with a severe eye disease which blurred his vision. But this cannot be fully proven. The word **“knew”** seems to solve the difficulty. This word among the Jews has also the meaning *“to acknowledge”* or *“to make recognition.”* For instance, it has that meaning in the exhortation **“to know those who labor among you.”** Paul did not know the high priest may therefore mean that he did not want to acknowledge Ananias as the high priest, that he refused to recognize him as such. When Paul said he knew not that it was the high priest, he acknowledged his error he had made in refusing to recognize the president of the council by ignoring him. This seems to solve the difficulty.

The next utterance of the Apostle is still more strange. Once again he addresses the council as men and brethren. Then he cried **“I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question.”**

This is the third claim he makes and it shows how far he had drifted. He had claimed being a Jew, then had pleaded his Roman citizenship, and now before the council, he reminds them that he is a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee.

Later from his Roman prison he wrote to the Philippians that he counted this all as dung. He had done so before. Here no doubt is a relapse. The reason which led him to do this was his knowledge that the Sanhedrim was composed of the two warring factions of Judaism, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. With his keen vision and knowledge of the conditions he saw the possible advantage of declaring himself a Pharisee. That might bring them to his side and end the difficulty in which he had become so seriously involved. Besides the confession that he is a prominent Pharisee, he stated the articles of the creed of the Pharisees which were so vigorously opposed by the Sadducees. He mentions **“the hope”** and **“resurrection of the dead,”** which was really in question. This was a true statement.

The hope is the Messianic hope of the coming of the Messiah. He had come in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and yet He is **“the hope”**; for He is coming again.

The resurrection of the dead is closely connected with Christ and His coming. The Sadducees were the Rationalists, and denied, besides the existence of spirits, the Messianic hope and the resurrection of the dead.

A great discussion arose between these two parties. A big commotion followed. Some of the scribes belonging to the Pharisees cried loudly in defence of the prisoner - **“We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.”**

The latter sentence was a faint echo of the advice given by Gamaliel. The scene which followed beggars description. The shouting must have been terrific and Paul was in danger of being pulled to pieces by the council mob. Lysias, the chief captain, was obliged to interfere. The soldiers, at his command, came down and rescued Paul and brought him into the castle. The cleverness of Paul had been the means of liberating him from the hands of the Sanhedrim.

## **II. The vision of the Lord (Verse 11).**

**“And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome”** (Verse 11).

This is a most gracious and blessed fact, that now the Lord came into this scene of confusion and failure and in greatest tenderness to comfort and cheer His servant.

One almost wishes it had pleased the Holy Ghost to give us a more detailed account of Paul in the castle that night and what took place. Two days had passed since the arrest of Paul and they had been eventful days. His body was bruised and full of pain. But how he must have suffered in his spirit!

All the warnings frequently uttered by the Spirit of God not to go up to Jerusalem came back to his mind. The failure of having not heeded these warnings must have weighed heavily upon him. And the disappointment he had suffered!

It was burning love for his brethren which had led him to Jerusalem and now he had received the fullest evidence that they would not receive his testimony.

Thinking of what he had done and failed must have greatly humbled the Apostle. And now he was a prisoner. His career in preaching the Gospel among the Gentiles and Jews had been cut short. No doubt left alone in the castle all these thoughts and others crowded in upon him. There he sought his Lord in Prayer. What a prayer it must have been Paul prayed in the castle! How the tears must have flown as he told the Lord all, confessing his failure and telling Him of his disappointment! And then, not an angel, but the Lord, stood by him that night. His loving arms were around His servant. He appeared to cheer him and assure him of His love.

There are three things especially to be noticed in the words of the Lord to Paul.

He strengthened him by the encouraging word, **“Be of good cheer.”**

In the New Testament this comforting expression is exclusively used by our Lord. And what a meaning it has coming from His lips! **“Be of good cheer.”** Disheartening were Paul’s experiences, perplexing his situation, dark and mysterious his future, but the Lord bade him to be of good cheer. What strength must have filled the Apostle’s heart as these words came to him! And we too can hear the words of cheer from our Lord in the midst of our difficulties and failures. He is the same to-day as he was then in that night. With such a Lord at our side we need never to despair.

Then the Lord spoke peace into his humbled breast and calmed all the feelings and questionings which had risen in Paul’s mind. How little, Paul may have said to himself, “I told the Jews about my Lord and the Gospel! My testimony was not as faithful as it should have been. But now the Lord tells him that he had testified of Him in Jerusalem.” What Grace is this! The Lord told him that he had after all borne witness of Him. He did not remind him of his mistakes, his faults, and how he might have avoided them, but He reminds him of his faithfulness. Such is our Lord in His gracious dealings with His servants. All his questionings were ended. He knew all was right between the Lord and himself and that he was under His gracious and loving care.

And then the Lord assures him also of future service. He had not yet reached the end of his labors. **“Thou must bear witness also at Rome.”** Rome then is his goal, which he has to reach as the prisoner of the Lord. How all this must have set him at rest! The Lord was with him and would bring him to Rome. And that Lord is with us and shall guide and provide for His servants. May our hearts be comforted and encouraged by Paul’s experience during that night in the castle.

### **III. The conspiracy against Paul and its discovery.**

**“And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy. And they came to the chief priests and elders, and said, We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul. Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain that he bring him down unto you to-morrow, as though ye would inquire something more perfectly concerning him; and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him. And when Paul’s sister’s son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul.**

**“Then Paul called one of the centurions Unto Mm. and said, Bring this young man unto the chief captain: for he hath a certain thing to tell him. So he took him, and brought Mm to the chief captain, and said, Paul the prisoner called me unto him, and prayed me to bring this young man unto thee, who hath something to say unto thee. Then the chief captain took him by the hand, and went with him aside privately and asked him, What is that thou hast to tell me? And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul to-morrow into the council, as though they would inquire somewhat of him more perfectly. But do not thou yield Unto them: for there lie in wait for him of them more than forty men, which have bound themselves with an oath, that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him: and now are they ready, looking for a promise from thee. So the chief captain then let the young man depart, and charged him, See thou tell no man that thou hast shewed these things to me” (Verses 12-22).**

The conspiracy against Paul reveals the condition of the nation. Jerusalem had indeed become a city of murderers (Isaiah 1:21). More than forty had made a religious vow that they would kill Paul. The plan is laid and everything ready for its execution. But they had not reckoned with Paul's Lord. He was in His own hands and not in the hands of the Jews or the Gentiles, even as the life of all His servants rests in His omnipotent hand. The plot is discovered. A nephew of Paul was the chosen instrument. Paul's sister, of whom we have no other knowledge apart from this passage, must have been a person of influence, for the son heard of the secret council and had likewise access into the castle. The chief captain heard of the plot from the lips of the young man and was now deeply concerned about Paul and his safety. This was the result of the knowledge this chief officer had gained, that Paul was a Roman citizen. The record needs no further comment. What now follows is all under His control, who had promised Paul that he would have to witness in Rome for Him.

#### **IV. Paul taken to Cesarea.**

**“And he called unto him two centurions, saying, Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Cesarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred, at the third hour of the night; And provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor. And he wrote a letter after this manner: Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix Sendeth greeting. This man was taken of the Jews, and should have been killed of them: then came I with an army, and rescued him, having understood that he was a Roman. And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council: Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds. And when it was told me how that the Jews laid wait for the man, I sent straightway to thee, and gave commandment to his accusers also to say before thee what they had against him. Farewell. Then the soldiers, as it was commanded them, took Paul, and brought him by night to Antipatris. On the morrow they left the horsemen to go with him, and returned to the castle. Who, when they came to Cesarea, and delivered the Epistle to the governor, presented Paul also before him. And when the governor had read the letter, he asked of what province he was. And when he understood that he was of Cilicia; I will hear thee, said he, when thine accusers are also come. And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's judgment hall!” (Verses 23-35).**

The prisoner of the Lord is now delivered into the hands of the Gentiles. A large force of soldiers accompanied Paul for his protection, while horses were also supplied to the Apostle. The danger was great, hence, the great precaution the chief officer, whose name is now mentioned, Claudius Lysias had taken. Could we have read in Paul's own heart we would have seen there the peace of Christ; the words of His Lord still resounded in that faithful and devoted heart - **“Be of good cheer.”**

The letter of Claudius Lysias to the governor Felix is interesting. It shows how Lysias claims the full credit of having rescued Paul, because he was a Roman. He declares him innocent, yet delivers him into the hands of the governor.

One would also like to know what had become of the forty conspirators. If they were true to their vow not to eat nor to drink till Paul had been killed, they must have starved to death, which, we are sure did not happen. Cesarea is reached in safety and Paul is delivered into the hands of the governor, who promised him a hearing as soon as the accusers would arrive. Jerusalem now laid forever behind him. Rome was before him.

~ end of chapter 23 ~

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