

THE ACTS

OF THE APOSTLES

Chapter 23:1 – 24:27 Paul on trial

*How did Paul escape the condemnation of the Jewish court?

*Is our conscience a perfect guide?

*Why did Paul have an escort of almost 500 soldiers?

Acts 22:30-23:10 Confusion in the Jewish court

The last time we saw Paul, he was in Roman custody. The Roman commander must have been thoroughly confused about him; the Jews were enraged at Paul, but he had no idea why. It seemed that Paul had done nothing wrong — he was not some kind of rebel leader, as the commander at first thought (see Acts 21:37-39) — and that his only crime was wanting to spread his religion to non-Jews (22:21-22). This made no sense to the commander. So he decided to settle the matter once for all by personally listening to the charges the Jewish Council had against Paul.

Paul's trial before the Jews didn't get off to a good start. Paul continued his refrain from the speech he gave from the stairs of the barracks, basically saying, "I have lived my life the way I have, whether as a zealous Jew or now as a preacher of Jesus, simply because I have been trying to obey God." But the high priest, Ananias, received this as a condemnation, and ordered that Paul be hit in the mouth. Paul responded angrily, pointing out Ananias's hypocrisy. Those standing around objected to Paul's words, saying that he was bad-mouthing the high priest. Paul's response, "I was not aware that he was high priest," was probably said sarcastically, to point out that Ananias's character and actions disqualified him from being a distinguished servant of God.

Paul was in a desperate situation. He saw quickly that a fair trial was impossible. Ananias the high priest, as we know from history, was notoriously corrupt, greedy, and self-serving, and the Jews' only goal was to do away with Paul. So Paul looked around for a way out. He noted that the Council was composed of two different Jewish sects: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. We saw the Pharisees quite a bit in the gospels, but the Sadducees had a lesser role in the ministry of Jesus. The main difference between the sects was differing beliefs on the after-life; the Sadducees refused to accept any sort of resurrection, or the idea that people could return to appear on the earth after their death, while the Pharisees believed in both concepts. Paul knew the Jews well enough to know that if he could play upon this difference, he could start the Council fighting among themselves so much that the Romans would dismiss the case. So, he shouted that he believed along with the Pharisees in the resurrection of the dead — which did actually address the true reason that he was on trial!

Paul's strategy worked. The resulting uproar was so great that the Roman commander, more confused than ever about the situation, forcibly removed Paul from the court and placed him back in the barracks for his own safety.

Note: "A perfectly good conscience"

Paul's statement that he had lived his life "with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day" (verse 1) sounds hard to believe at first. He had persecuted God's own church!

This tells us clearly that our conscience fails us as a guide sometimes; it is not perfect. Just because something seems or feels OK does not mean that it is OK. Paul

thought that he was serving God when he tortured Christians! Our conscience is only as good as its training. We have to fashion our conscience after the word of God (Hebrews 5:11-14).

Acts 23:11-30 The plot against Paul's life

Paul must have been pretty distraught following all of these events. But Jesus came to him in a night vision to encourage him. He said that Paul was going to make it all the way to Rome, where he would have an opportunity to proclaim the gospel.

That promise must have meant a lot to Paul when he found out through his nephew that 40 Jews had vowed to kill him and had made a plan to ambush him. Paul sent the young man to warn the commander. By now, the commander, whose name was Claudius Lysias, had gotten the distinct impression that Paul's case must be very important, even though he could not understand why. He was not about to let the Jews kill him. So, he ordered a massive guard to escort Paul to Caesarea, where the governor would try him. Lysias's letter to governor Felix showed that he really did not understand the true nature of the squabble; this pagan Roman could not comprehend Jewish religious zeal.

Note: Promises that demand action

Having received the Lord's promise that he would survive until he reached Rome, Paul might have just sat back and relaxed when his nephew told him about the Jews' murderous plot. But instead, Paul realized that he had a role to play in God fulfilling His promise.

The same is true with us today. Just because God promises to save us by grace does not mean we should not work hard to obtain our salvation (Eph. 2:8-10; Phi. 2:12). And just because we pray to God and ask Him for a certain blessing, does not mean we shouldn't do all that we can to make it come to pass. God uses our actions to give us many generous gifts.

Acts 23:31-24:9 Paul accused before Felix

After a two day trek, the troop arrived in Caesarea without any incident, and the governor had Paul wait in custody until the Jews arrived to bring charges against him. His accusers wasted little time. Within a week they had arrived, and the trial began.

But Ananias and the Jews had a different strategy this time: they hired a Roman attorney to bring the case before the Roman governor. "Attorneys" in that society were actually trained in public speaking, not law; Tertullus's job was simply to be convincing and make Felix favor their side. Tertullus knew how to make his case well. After flattering Felix, he called Paul a troublemaker who stirs up riots wherever he goes. He called Paul names and accused him of defiling the temple, which would catch Felix's ear because the Romans, of course, didn't want the Jewish nation upset. Finally, Tertullus pictured the Jews as dealing justly with Paul, when Lysias and the Romans interfered. Even though his facts were not accurate, Tertullus's case would have been convincing!

Acts 24:10-21 Paul's response

But if Tertullus's accusations were convincing, Paul's defense was masterful. He responded with at least 7 different arguments:

1. I was in Jerusalem to worship, not to cause trouble (v. 11-12).
2. Since my accusers have no witnesses, they cannot prove their charges (v. 13).
3. I am indeed a Christian, but Christians are good people (v. 14-16).
4. I came to do a good deed: give charity (v. 17).
5. It was actually Jews from Asia that caused the trouble (v. 18-19).
6. I've already had a trial, and was not convicted (v. 20).
7. Here's what the Jews are really upset about: my teachings. I haven't broken any laws (v. 21).

Acts 24:22-27 **The aftermath**

Felix knew enough about the gospel to know that Christians were good people, and that made the Jews' story suspicious. So, he decided to put the case off until the commander came to tell his side of the story. Until then, Paul would be held by the Romans, but with certain freedoms. For instance, his friends could come visit him.

In fact, Felix himself came to visit Paul often. However, it wasn't to minister to Paul so much as to try to extract a bribe from Paul in exchange for his freedom. Of course, Paul did not "play the game" and instead started to preach to Felix and his wife, Drusilla. But when Paul spoke about the core concepts of the gospel, Felix got scared and put him off. Two years went by, and Felix was replaced as governor by a man named Porcius Festus. Felix, as he left his position, tried one more time to smooth things over with the Jews by leaving Paul in prison.

Note: "When I find time"

Why did Felix get scared when Paul was talking to him about the gospel? Righteousness, self-control, and judgment can be scary subjects. Knowing how sinful we are and because of that how far from the holy God we are...knowing how much dedication and humility it will take to change our way of living...knowing the eternal damnation that awaits us if we don't repent...these thoughts should make us afraid!

But we should not have the kind of fear that Felix had. Our fear and respect for God should drive us to obey Him immediately (Deuteronomy 6:2), and ultimately receive His blessings (Psalm 103:17).

However, Felix's fear had the opposite effect. He pushed Paul and the message away, saying, "Go away for the present, and when I find time, I will summon you." So often we do the same things in our lives. We lay aside the drastic changes we need to make in our lives because we are afraid it will be so difficult. We say we'll get to them when we are ready. But the same thing happens with us as happened to Felix: nothing. Two whole years passed, and Felix had never found the time. And so he missed his opportunity.

Let's never miss the opportunities God gives us. Our fear of Him should drive us to transform our lives immediately, in the present, every single day.

Choose the right answer:

- ___ 1. Why did Claudius Lysias (the commander) put Paul on trial before the Jews? a) to find out why the Jews accused him, b) to watch him get torn to pieces by the Jews, c) to accuse him of violating the Roman-Jewish treaty, or d) to get a sentence of execution.
- ___ 2. Who told Paul that he would make it safely to Rome? a) his nephew, b) Claudius Lysias, c) Jesus, or d) Felix.
- ___ 3. What did Tertullus NOT say in the case against Paul? a) he was a troublemaker wherever he went, b) he was a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes, c) he lied about being a Roman citizen, or d) he defiled the temple.
- ___ 4. How did Felix decide the case? a) he would send Paul to Rome, b) Paul would be executed, c) Paul would be freed, or d) Paul would be retained in custody until a later trial.

True or false:

- ___ 1. Paul stated, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."
- ___ 2. Ananias and the rest of the Jewish Council were known for their fair trials.
- ___ 3. Paul escaped the Jewish Council by creating dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees.
- ___ 4. Our conscience is always right and we only need to listen to our feelings to discern good and evil.
- ___ 5. Lysias didn't believe Paul's nephew about the Jews' plot to kill Paul.
- ___ 6. Felix got scared when he heard Paul talk about God, and sent him away until he had more time.

The person who sent this lesson to you will be happy to correct your answers and discuss any questions you have with you. Send your responses and your contact information to:

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