

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ
Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 18

Day One: A Divided Sanhedrin Hears Paul

The Apostle Paul was about to be examined by scourging to determine the cause of the uproar his presence had stirred. The pivotal point of his brief remarks to the Sanhedrin: "I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead" (v. 6 NIV). The repercussions of that statement brought about an environment that was not only dangerous to Paul but terrifying to those who held him in protective custody, unsure of what to do with him and what would take place next.

How do you respond to those who oppose you simply because you're a Christian? How about to non-believers that are in authority over you in an environment that grows more hostile every day? Acts 23 gives us a visual on how to remain totally dependent on God, even when we don't see any way out or possibility of rescue. He is always near; He will never leave us nor forsake us. He is working out His plan even when we cannot see evidence of it. Our part is to walk by faith:

Forsaking All I Take Him.

Read Acts 23.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Philippians 4:11b–13 Write the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

. . . I have learned in whatever state I am to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Paul was again a prisoner, this time under house arrest and able to have visitors. But what were the charges against him? No one seemed to know, presenting a real dilemma for the Roman authorities. To have stirred up such pandemonium he must have committed terrible crimes. Claudius Lysias, the Roman commander, arranged for a special meeting of the Sanhedrin to find out. He brought Paul before them while he stood by to watch over his prisoner.

1. Without hesitating, Paul begins speaking, “Men and brethren,” identifying with his fellow Jews. What was his statement regarding how he lived?

2. What was the high priest’s response to Paul’s statement?

Paul shocked everyone by rebuking Ananias, and there is much speculation as to why he did such a thing.

3. Why do *you* think Paul uttered his statement in verse 3?

Was it a mistake? Were Paul’s thoughts and emotions battling it out? His apparent apology in verse 5 makes it seem as if he misspoke in a weak moment and was convicted in his spirit, making this great apostle all the more human in our eyes.

The word “conscience” means *to know with*, or *to know together*. It is the inner witness [judge] that distinguishes between whether we do right or wrong. The conscience does not set the standard—it only reveals whether or not the standard is being met or compromised. Scripture tells us that it is possible to have a *pure conscience* (1 Timothy 3:9), a *defiled conscience* (1 Corinthians 8:7), and *evil conscience* (Hebrews 10:22), and a *seared conscience* (1 Tim. 4:1–2). Paul had relentlessly hunted down and persecuted Christians, yet later in life he claimed to have a “good conscience before God.”

4. Paul wasn’t boasting, what truth made it possible for him to claim that statement? 2 Cor. 4:6
 - a. After Paul became a Christian, what did he say regarding himself? 1 Timothy 1:15–16

God gave everyone a conscience as the *plumb line* to help us know when we cross the line. If we would listen to our conscience then we, like Paul, could say, “I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men” (Acts 24:16).

5. Personal: How would maintaining a good conscience contribute to the quality of *your* Christian life?

Day Two:

A Conspiracy in the Making

Read Acts 23:11–22 for review.

Three times Paul addressed the group as “brethren” or “brothers.” He then cut to the bottom line with these strong words: “Concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!” (v. 6). When there arose a great dissension in the group, the commander feared for Paul’s life.

1. Although Paul’s fellow believers could visit him in prison, Luke does not mention those in the Jerusalem church coming to meet his needs or interceding on his behalf. Who was with Paul meeting the need of his soul?
 - a. When you picture this poignant scene, what comes to mind?
 - b. Personal: Now picture in your mind the Lord Jesus standing beside *you* in your circumstances. What difference does this assurance make in your circumstances?
2. The same radical Jews who started a riot at the temple took an equally disturbing oath. What was it and how many were involved in the conspiracy?

Going directly to the chief priests and elders and avoiding those supportive of Paul, Luke seems to say that the majority of the Sanhedrin agreed, joining with the conspiracy. In a mad twist of irony, they were prepared to break one of God’s commandments to achieve their evil end. So passionate were they in their hatred of Paul that they did not fear the potential consequences of Rome if they were caught.

3. Who heard about the plot and intervened?
 - a. What did Paul instruct the centurion to do?

Why would a Roman commander take the word of a young teenager? Perhaps he feared the Jewish leaders were capable of anything. Perhaps Lysias envisioned the possible consequences he would face if he lost his prisoner to them. God may have simply given favor to Paul’s nephew, we aren’t told; but with forty men united by an oath the plot indeed thickened!

We know nothing of Paul’s nephew and sister other than what Luke mentions in this chapter. Some commentators believe that Paul was excommunicated from his Jewish family when he became a Christian. He indicates in one of his letters (Philippians 3:8) that he suffered the loss of all things. Because Paul was previously a Pharisee, his sister would’ve been privy to inside information that was being passed along the grape vine. Whatever the case, his sister and nephew knew about the murderous plot and were willing to do something about it. Honorable mention must go to Claudius Lysias, who devised a simple but wise plan to move Paul out of Jerusalem and into the jurisdiction of the governor of Caesarea.

Day Three: Paul is Sent to Governor Felix

Read Acts 23:23–35 for review.

All things pointed to the providence of God at work to save Paul. Commander Claudius Lysias, taking no chances and under cover of darkness, orders his centurions to prepare a large assembly of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to guarantee a safe escort of Paul.

In an unusual move, Lysias composes a letter to governor Felix because of the rare situation dealing with Paul's Roman citizenship.

1. Read the letter delivered to Felix. Compare the way the commander presented the situation to Felix (v. 27) with the way it actually happened (22:29). Please share your thoughts on it.
2. What was the commander's final analysis of the accusations against Paul? v. 29
Was he a threat to Rome?

Paul indeed had the right to be tried in his home province or in the province where the alleged charges took place. Having arrived safely in Caesarea, Felix questioned Paul and decided to hear the case once Paul's accusers had joined them. We will see in the coming weeks that Felix vacillated and procrastinated in his thinking about the matter, not wanting to displease the Jews. Ultimately, Paul would remain a prisoner there for the next two years.

Deeper Discoveries ~

St. Augustine once said: *Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to His love, and the future to His providence.* Without any doubt, the believer is safe in the hands of God, who can turn even the wrath of our enemies into a smooth path upon which we can travel safely in order to accomplish God's purpose. Read Psalm 145:17–21, and finish the following . . .

- a. *The Lord is righteous* _____
- b. *The Lord is gracious* _____
- c. *The Lord is near* _____
- d. *He will fulfill* _____
- e. *He will hear* _____
- f. *He will preserve* _____
- g. *My mouth shall speak* _____

Trust God to guard, guide and deliver you safely to your destination in His perfect will.

Day Four:

The Lord Stood with Paul

From Pharisee to persecutor, and preacher to prisoner, the miles logged on Paul's odometer through the years could have clearly indicated the Lord's faithfulness and nearness. But by Acts 23, Paul was hated by his own countrymen and held tenuously at the mercy of a heathen soldier who could at any moment turn against him. Worst of all, he was unsure of whether he would ever make it to Rome. Sure, Paul could look back and recall the occasions when he had heard the voice of the Lord. Initially on the Damascus road, Jesus identified himself and told Paul for the first time to, "Arise, to into the city, and wait to be told what to do" (Acts 9). Then when Paul was opposed by many in Corinth, Jesus spoke to him in the night by a vision: "Do not be afraid . . . and do not keep silent . . . for I am with you" (Acts 18). Again when Paul's life was threatened in Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to him in the temple telling him what to do (Acts 22). Now, as Paul realizes the possibility that he might not reach Rome to testify of the good news, Jesus appears to him again to lift his spirit and instruct him in what to do. The visual we derive from these verses is a beautiful picture of what the Lord wants to do in our times of need.

Circumstantially, things did not look good for Paul: "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'*" (v. 11). Let these words sink in as you read them. Then think about how the Lord's message would have made a world of difference in Paul's heart and perspective.

1. *Be of good cheer*: How did these words impart *courage* to Paul's spirit?

2. *For as you have testified for me in Jerusalem*: In what way did Jesus *commend* Paul?

3. *So you must also bear witness at Rome*: How did the Lord's words instill *confidence* in Paul for was yet ahead?

Selah ~

Have *you* heard the Lord's voice through your lesson this week? Has He brought you a word of courage—commendation—confidence, or some other instruction? Make note of it and how His word has affected you.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: *The Lord is near to all who call upon Him in truth* (Psalm 145:18). Write Him a prayer of thanks.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.
