

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 24

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER 23

INTRODUCTION

Paul's conciliatory speech on the steps of the Fortress of Antonia did not satisfy the angry mob, which was predominantly Jews. He could not complete his speech for the crowd interrupted him by shouting, "Away with him." Paul would have been killed if he had not been under the protection of the Roman commander. When the Roman commander wanted to scourge him in order to find out the cause of all the commotion, Paul revealed that he was a Roman citizen, hinting that it was an offence to subject him to the *flagellum* without a fair trial. Determined to ascertain the real cause of the commotion, the Roman commander ordered the chief priests and their council (Sanhedrin) to meet, and to have Paul appear before them. The present chapter gives an account of Paul's defence before the Sanhedrin and the incidents attendant to it.

The chapter is enlightening for several reasons. God's providential care over His servants, who are in difficulty, is clearly illustrated in Paul's life when he needed it. We see the religious leaders flouting the very laws that they should uphold and enforce in order to achieve their own interests. How often we are afraid of what people

would think of our actions, but we should learn that God's judgement of our actions and behaviour is more important than man's judgement. Luke, the inspired writer, presents Paul as a model of Christian valour. We cannot help but admire Paul's courage and seek to know its source.

Like a musical symphonic work, the chapter has four movements: 1) Paul's defence before the Sanhedrin (vv.1-10); 2) The Lord Jesus appeared to Paul (vv.11); 3) The conspiracy to murder Paul (vv.12-22); and 4) Claudius Lysias sent Paul to Felix, Governor of Caesarea (vv.23-35).

COMMENTARY

Paul's Defence before the Sandhedrin

The meeting of the Sanhedrin was an informal one for it was ordered by Claudius Lysias, the military commander of the Romans, who was responsible for maintaining peace and order in the Holy City. The Jews had been rioting, interrupting Paul's defence speech to them, and crying out for his blood. Having been told that Paul was a Roman citizen, the commander was determined to know the reason for the unruly disturbance in the city. So when the chief priests and the council of elders met, Paul was brought before them.

As he stood before the council, Paul fixed his eyes intently at all of them. Then he proceeded to address them in the usual customary way – "men and brethren", addressing them as equals and in all respects declared that he had fulfilled his duty to the commonwealth of Israel in all good conscience in the sight of God until that day. This does not mean that Paul's

actions had always been right. But it means that he felt no guilt for what he had done in spite of the accusations brought against him.¹

Paul Was Slapped

Ananias, the high priest, understood Paul's words as a claim that although he was now a Christian, he was still a good Jew. To Ananias, this claim by Paul seemed to be the height of arrogance and even blasphemy. Insofar as Paul was concerned, it was not meant as an arrogant boast. He also did not intend to mock the court. He knew that, since he became a Christian, his behaviour had enraged all of them. In their eyes, he had become a traitor, an apostate and a dangerous man. Paul was sincerely trying to explain to them out of a genuine conscience that what he did was what God would have him to do. Ananias then commanded those who stood near Paul to slap him on his mouth.

Instantly, Paul retorted: "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?" (v.3). In anger, Paul rebuked Ananias. It was a curse asking God to strike Ananias. "Thou whited wall" was a term for hypocrisy. Ananias had flouted the law, and now sat in judgement to uphold the law. Paul did not know that Ananias was the high priest. He did not recognise the high priest because Ananias was a new

¹ Conscience does not determine whether actions are morally right or wrong. For example, Paul's conscience had once permitted him to persecute Christian Jews. It does not set the moral standards. It only applies the standard of the inner person's judgement. Therefore a conscience that is not in accordance with biblical truth will not necessarily pass accurate judgement.

high priest. Paul had been away from Jerusalem for quite a while. Moreover, since this was an informal meeting of the Sanhedrin, Ananias probably did not wear his ceremonial high priest clothes. So when Paul was told that it was the high priest he had just rebuked, he apologised for unwittingly broken the law. Paul quoted the law written by Moses in Exodus 22:28: "Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people." This is another testimony that Paul lived in good conscience before God. Although Ananias was an evil man and a disgrace to the office of the high priest, Paul humbled himself and willingly submitted himself to the law of God.² However, it was not right for Ananias to have Paul slapped. Jewish law upheld a person's innocence until proven guilty. Ananias had judged and condemned Paul even before Paul was given the opportunity to defend himself. Despite this, Paul felt compelled to admit his guilt for rebuking one in authority.

Dissension Arose

Paul observed that there were Sadducees and Pharisees in the council. He cried out that he was a Pharisee and that the charge brought against him was about "the hope and resurrection of the dead" (v.6). When Paul had said this, there was a

² Ananias reigned for about 12 years beginning from A.D. 47. He was one of the most cruel, evil, corrupt high priest ever to hold office. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, he stole from the common priests the tithes that should have gone to them, beating any priest who resisted. He did not hesitate to use violence to further his goals. He was hated by the Jews because of his pro-Roman stance. When the Jewish revolt against Rome broke out in A.D. 66, he was promptly killed by the Jewish people. He fled for his life but the Jewish guerrillas found him hiding in an aqueduct at Herod's palace. They killed him. God did indeed smite this wicked man.

disagreement between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who were the actual rulers of the Temple. Luke gave a summary of the beliefs of the Sadducees (v.8): they did not believe in the resurrection (which would include the afterlife); they did not believe in angels and in spirits. The Lord Jesus had described them as priests who did not know the Scriptures and the power of God (Matthew 22:29). On the other hand, the Pharisees believed all: the resurrection of the dead, angels and spirits. Paul declared that he was a Pharisee although he was also a Christian. A Pharisee could be a Christian and still could remain a Pharisee. A Sadducee could not be a Christian and remain a Sadducee. A Pharisee's beliefs are more compatible with Christianity than the Sadducee's.³ This is true as long as his position as a Pharisee is one of position only and not practice. The legalism of the Pharisees was categorically condemned by Christ.

The scribes who were the Pharisees in the council pronounced that they found no evil in Paul, and that if an angel or a spirit had spoken to him, they would be guilty of fighting against God (v.9). The state of commotion and confusion became worse. The Roman military commander was watching, and fearing for the life of Paul, ordered his troops to pull Paul out of the confusion and bitter dispute, and to bring him back into the barracks of the Fort of Antonia. The commander still could not find out what crime Paul had committed that he deserved the death penalty. But he had seen enough to write in his report, which he subsequently sent to Governor Felix in Caesarea. He wrote that Paul was

accused by his fellow Jews of "questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds" (v.29). Once again, Paul was rescued by the Romans from his own people who hated him just as they hated the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus Appeared to Paul

Since Paul arrived in Jerusalem, it had been trouble for him at every turn of his life. He had been falsely accused, abused and beaten almost to death, kept under custody by the Romans who nearly scourged him, hated by his fellow Jews and had no hope of a fair hearing by the Sanhedrin. He would now be physically battered, much discouraged and very uncertain about his earthly future. But there was One who knew his plight. Paul did not need to worry. That night, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him.⁴ The Lord stood beside him and had words of commendation and consolation. The Lord told him to cheer up and not to be downcast. Paul had done commendably in witnessing the Lord Jesus in Jerusalem. The Lord then promised him that he would also testify for Him in Rome. Paul had an earnest desire to preach in Rome (19:21). In his letter to the Romans, he shared this desire with them.⁵ The Lord personally assured him that his desire would be fulfilled. This was a great message of

⁴ Once in Corinth (18:9-10): Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city.

⁵ Romans 1:9-11- For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you. For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established.

³ Nicodemus was a Christian and still remained a Pharisee (John 3:1; 19:39).

encouragement and confidence to Paul. In the midst of all the oppositions and accusations flung against him, the Lord's verdict on him really made the difference. What God thinks is by far better than what man thinks!

The Conspiracy to Murder Paul

Fanatical Jews swore to kill Paul. They could not depend on the Romans to execute Paul since they could not accuse him of any capital crime. So they decided to take matters into their own hands. They grouped themselves together and took an oath not to eat or drink until Paul was killed. There were more than forty of them. They even confided their intention with the chief priests and the elders (v.14). They asked the council for help. They came out with a plot: the chief priests and elders together with the council would request that Paul be brought down again for another hearing the next day, and these conspirators would then waylay Paul and murder him (v.15). The fact that Ananias and the council were willing to go along with the plot speaks of the extent of self-interest and corruption in the Sanhedrin. So it was the day after the abortive Sanhedrin meeting that these Jews (more than forty) decided to defend God's honour and the sanctity of the temple by deceiving the Roman military commander, by breaking the moral Law and committing murder. Everyone was involved. Paul was in great danger.

The Conspiracy Exposed

The conspirators could secretly cook up this devious and murderous plan against one of God's servants. But God knew. By the providence of God, Paul's sister's son, who was a young lad, came to know of the plot. It is not recorded how he discovered the plot.

The important thing was that the plot was no more a secret. The young lad went to Paul and reported the matter to him. Paul then called one of the centurions who were guarding him, told him to escort the young lad to the Roman military commander for he had something to say to the commander. Interestingly, the centurion listened to Paul and took the young lad to Claudius Lysias, the commander. Claudius was accommodating and spoke to the young lad in private. The young man reported to the commander, who after listening, believed the young man's story. He cautioned the young lad not to tell anyone else. Consequently, the Roman commander wasted no time. He assigned two centurions to prepare a military escort to go to Caesarea. The military escort would comprise two hundred foot-soldiers, seventy horsemen and another two hundred "spearmen". Altogether, there were about four hundred and seventy people involved to protect and escort Paul to Caesarea. While it is true that the military escort was unusually large, the safety of a Roman citizen, in this case, Paul, was of paramount importance.

Claudius Lysias Sent Paul to Felix

When all was ready, they left Fort Antonia, Jerusalem "at the third hour of the night" (about 9.00 p.m.) to Caesarea where Governor Felix was residing (v.23). Caesarea was the capital of the Roman province of Judaea. It is the seat of Roman governors and the headquarters of the Roman soldiers in that province. Claudius Lysias also sent a letter to Governor Felix explaining the purpose of transferring Paul to him. Claudius Lysias gave a short account of events leading to his decision to send Paul to Caesarea. He ascertained the charge against Paul was about some

Jewish religious law and not of a nature that deserved capital punishment or imprisonment. Lysias also informed Governor Felix that he had told Paul's accusers to go to Caesarea to appear before Felix to let him hear their charges against Paul.

Accordingly, the soldiers took Paul and left Jerusalem for Caesarea, which was about 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem. The march must have been at a relatively fast pace for they reached Antipatris (37 miles from Jerusalem) when it was still night. When morning came, they continued the journey. This time, the foot-soldiers returned to Jerusalem, and the rest proceeded on horses to Caesarea (v.32). Throughout the journey, Paul was given a horse to ride. It was less of a strain for him. The entourage finally arrived in Caesarea. Claudius Lysias' letter was handed to Governor Felix, and Paul was brought before him. After reading the letter, Felix asked Paul for the province from which he came. Felix's question was to determine whether he had jurisdiction to hear the case. Paul replied that he was from Cilicia, and the province was within Felix's jurisdiction.⁶ The governor assured Paul that he would hear him when his accusers arrive from Jerusalem. Paul was kept under guard in the magnificent palace, which Herod the Great had built for himself, but which was now the governor's official residence. Paul was comfortably lodged – comparable to today's five-star hotel!

⁶ Felix was appointed governor of Judaea in A.D. 52 and he ruled for about 8 years. He was corrupt and utterly ruthless in quelling Jewish uprisings.

PRACTICAL VALUE

God's providential protection and care for His servants is clearly illustrated in the life of Paul, especially from the time he arrived in Jerusalem. If not for God's providence, Paul would have been murdered by the angry Jewish mob at the temple (21:32). God's unseen hand was working for His servant Paul. How did the Roman commander arrive in the nick of time to save Paul? In this chapter, Paul was blessed under the watchful eye of the Roman commander. It was sensible of him to decide that Paul should be pulled out of the Sanhedrin meeting, which ended in confusion and heated debate between the two angry factions. It was a mystery how Paul's nephew came to know of the conspiracy plot, and that he was given free access to Paul in the Fort of Antonia where he was kept under guard. Having known the plot, Paul did not share with the centurion about it, but he only asked the centurion to bring his nephew to see the commander. The centurion readily agreed! The commander was willing to accommodate Paul's young nephew, and he gave time to hear him. Then he believed the boy's story; he acted accordingly and immediately. Paul was saved and sent to Caesarea, out of harm's way! In addition, at a time when he was downcast and despondent, the Lord Jesus Himself appeared and encouraged him. Paul experienced the truth expressed by Peter (1 Peter 5:7): "Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you."

Paul strikes us as a model child of God. His sole aim in life was to do the will of God. He carried out God's will with courage, not letting Him down. He feared not for his life, not because he did not value life, but because he trusted

God completely. At a time when he was being battered and accused by his fellow countrymen from the lowest to the highest in the social and religious strata, the Lord's verdict on him was the one that counted most. In life what counts for eternity is what God thinks of us and not what man thinks of us. AMEN

2. How did Paul show spiritual maturity and self-control by the way he replied the high priest Ananias?

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

Monday: Acts 23:1-6; Romans 7:14-19; Philippians 3:4-6.

Tuesday: Acts 23:7-11; Luke 21:12-19; 2 Corinthians 1:4-5.

Wednesday: Acts 23:12-15; Proverbs 21:1.

Thursday: Acts 23:16-22; John 6:5-10.

Friday: Acts 23:23-35; 1 Corinthians 10:12-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:3.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul was slapped in the mouth. What was Paul claiming about himself for saying what he said in the Council?

3. What were the doctrinal differences in the Council? What did Paul do? Which group did he identify himself with?

4. What was the comfort and encouragement Paul needed at this time, and how would the vision and the words of the Lord Jesus meet all his needs?

5. How did the Jews react to the stalemate within the Council over Paul's guilt or innocence? How did God send deliverance in his case? How would you explain that Paul acted with courage and faith?

6. What do you learn about the protection and provision of God in Acts 23:10-30?
