

For You Have Testified for Me

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The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/b58vHdj4dl4>

The scripture reading is Acts 22:30-23:22

In our recent studies, we have demonstrated that Jerusalem was a very dangerous place, yet Paul was determined to travel there, testify before the council, complete the necessary rituals of purification, fulfill the requirements of the Nazarite vow, and deliver to the believers the funds he had collected on their behalf from the believers in the diaspora.

When he arrived in Caesarea, the prophet Agabus spoke a warning to Paul about what would happen to him while in Jerusalem.

Acts 21:10-11 NKJV 10 And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

Very quickly, this prophecy came to be. When Paul appeared before the Jerusalem Council, he was instructed to pay the purification expenses of four other men who had also come to Jerusalem from the diaspora. Seizing upon the opportunity presented to them, Paul's enemies among the Jews, accused Paul of bringing Gentiles into the Temple; something very much forbidden in Jewish religious law.

The result was a great commotion and near riot in the temple. With the city already on the edge, and tensions running high, Paul was taken away by the Roman garrison and the Temple shut down in an effort to control the situation.

Paul was not merely a Jew, but he was also a Roman citizen. An apparent rarity among the general Jewish population. Roman citizenship afforded one a great deal of privilege as well as special status and treatment under Roman law. Paul received his citizenship by birthright, the Roman commander purchased his.

Acts 22:27-29 NKJV 27 Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." 28 The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." 29 Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.

The Roman commander questioned Paul about the alleged commotion that took place in the Temple and the accusations leveled against him by some of the Jews there. Determining that this was a matter best addressed by the Jews themselves, the Roman commander ordered that Paul be taken before the Jewish governing body known as the Sanhedrin.

Acts 22:30 NKJV 30 The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them.

Paul had previously been an agent of the Sanhedrin, working closely with them in persecuting the early believers of Yeshua as Messiah. Paul would more than likely have known many of its current members

personally. Members of the Sanhedrin were divided between the two primary sects of Judaism of that time, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These two factions were at opposite extremes, both doctrinally and politically. The majority of the Sanhedrin as well as the office of the High Priest, were held by the Sadducees who had thrown in with the Romans politically. Paul began to speak boldly before this assembly.

Acts 23:1-2 NKJV 1 Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." 2 And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

Paul's opening salvo was nothing short of a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the high priest Ananias who was appointed to the office by Roman authority rather than by means of Torah authority. In his opening remark, Paul was speaking as a Jew in a Jewish context. He told them, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." The meaning of this statement is not clear in the English translation. In Greek, the verb "pol-it-yoo'-om-ahē" is used. It is number 4176 in the Strong's Concordance meaning, to behave as a citizen. Paul was telling the Sanhedrin that He was behaving as a citizen of Israel, that is a Torah observant Jew, and that he had remained a Torah observant Jew to that very day. In the biblical context, this word is always used in reference to living a Torah based lifestyle. It is used in the apocryphal books of the Maccabees to live according to the Torah of God.ⁱ The historian Josephus uses this same term to describe himself as being counted among the Pharisees in his own biography.ⁱⁱ

When we understand the true meaning of this Greek verb, then we can better understand Ananias' immediate and violent reaction to Paul's statement in verse two. (As a side note, you may want to refer to Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book 20 for historical background on the corruption among the wealthy and aristocratic Sadducees of this time)

Paul's response to the slap across his face is nothing short of astonishing. Paul's opening statement did not merit such a response from the high priest. According to the Torah and rules of procedure of the Sanhedrin, prisoners were not to be punished before conviction or be mistreated while on trial.ⁱⁱⁱ To get a better perspective, let's look at the translation from the Aramaic version of Acts.

Acts 23:3 AENT 3 And Paul said to him: "Elohim is from this moment to strike you down, (you) White Walled! For, you sit judging me according to the Torah, while you transgress Torah and command to beat me."

Paul referred to the high priest Ananias as a "White Wall or Whitewashed Wall." This may be recalling Yeshua's teaching about whitewashed sepulchers analogous to religious hypocrisy.

Matthew 23:27 NKJV 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

Paul's response to Ananias would turn out to be prophetic. A decade later, during the revolt that led to the destruction of the Temple, Ananias was seized by the Zealots and assassinated along with his brother for their collaboration with the Romans.^{iv}

Paul was rebuked for speaking to the high priest in such a disrespectful manner.

Acts 23:4-5 NKJV 4 And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" 5 Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

Paul may not have recognized Ananias as the current high priest. The corruption among the elitist Sadducean priesthood was such that any one person serving in the office of high priest would not normally hold it for more than a year. Often only several months passed before a high priest was replaced through assassination or other means. Ananias had replaced the murdered Jonathan only a few months earlier. Paul had a great respect for the office of high priest even if the Sadducees did not.

Looking around at the assembled tribunal, Paul saw an opportunity to drive a wedge between the opposing factions.

Acts 23:6-8 NKJV 6 But when Paul perceived that 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; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" 7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. 8 For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection--and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both.

Luke does not record all of Paul's speech before the Sanhedrin at this time. It seems likely that Paul told the entire story from his initial persecution of the Way and the stoning of Stephen under the order of this very body, to his miraculous encounter with Yeshua on the road to Damascus, to his commission of taking the gospel to the Gentiles, and ending with his statement about being a lifelong and generational Pharisee. Paul knew that he would not find justice from the Sanhedrin, but perhaps he could split them along their differing religious and political lines. Perhaps he could draw some support from his fellow Pharisees.

Acts 23:9-10 NKJV 9 Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God." 10 Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.

Well, I guess that is one way to get out of hot water! The Pharisees and the Sadducees disagreed on virtually every point of religious doctrine. The most striking and basic of their disagreements was in regard to the resurrection and the existence of an immortal soul. Josephus writes of the striking differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees.

"The Pharisees are friendly to one another, and they advocate concord and respect for the public, But the behavior of the Sadducees, even toward one another, is to some degree uncivilized. Their conduct with those who are on their own party is as barbarous as if they were strangers to them."

By invoking these differences in his testimony before the Sanhedrin, Paul was able to cause such an uproar that, for his own protection, he had to be removed from the scene by the Roman guards. Later that night, the LORD spoke to Paul, giving him reassurance and instruction about his next journey.

Acts 23:11 NKJV 11 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."

Paul was not yet out of danger from his sworn enemies in Jerusalem. Forty plus men, possibly Sicarii Zealots, banded together and took an oath among themselves to ambush and murder Paul knowing that a conviction from the Sanhedrin was unlikely.

Acts 23:12-13 NKJV 12 And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. 13 Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy.

The Sicarii were terrorists at war with Rome. But why should they care about Paul? What would be their motive for wanting Paul dead? First Fruits of Zion in their work *The Chronicles of the Apostles* offers an answer:

“The Zealots considered the disciples of Yeshua as opponents to their cause. Yeshua’s followers dutifully rendered unto Caesar what was Caesar’s and predicted Jerusalem’s impending destruction at enemy hands. They taught forgiveness and love for enemies. They preached, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.” Yeshua’s teaching infuriated the Zealots and clashed with their radical messianism.”^{vi}

The Zealots had an almost xenophobic hatred of Gentiles. Paul’s gospel of Gentile inclusion was, as far as they were concerned, beyond the pale. The rumor that Paul had brought a Gentile into the temple was, for them, the last straw and they saw no choice but to assassinate him.

This group of forty Zealots, as unlikely as it seems since they were the group that carried out the assassination of the previous high priest Jonathan, secretly approached the chief priests to facilitate ambushing Paul while he was transported through the streets of Jerusalem.

Acts 23:14-15 NKJV 14 They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul. 15 "Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

Somehow news of the plot leaked out. Perhaps too many people knew of it to keep it secret for any length of time. It was a Family member of Paul’s, his nephew, his sister’s son, who heard of the plot and warned Paul of the danger ahead.

Acts 23:16-17 NKJV 16 So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17 Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him."

Paul wanted to keep the matter quite and did not tell the centurion about the plot to murder him. Instead Paul asked that his nephew be taken directly to the commander to relay the warning.

Acts 23:18-22 NKJV 18 So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you." 19 Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside and asked privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" 20 And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. 21 "But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you." 22 So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me."

Because of Paul's status as a Roman citizen, the commander was both motivated and obligated to protect Paul from the Jewish assassins. Wherever Paul went and to whom ever he spoke, Paul understood, not only the danger that he was exposed to, but he also understood that he was under the protection of the Holy Spirit every step of the way. Being a Roman citizen granted Paul certain privileges and rights that most Jews of that day did not enjoy. His Roman citizenship put Paul was in a unique position to bring the gospel message to the Gentiles world. And only a Roman citizen could appeal his case to Roman authorities. Paul would go on to Caesarea to speak before Felix and further still to testify before Emperor Nero.

In every step of Paul's journey, we see that he is incredibly successful in his mission despite the hardships and persecution along the way. Whether he spoke to a slave or to a free man, to a shopkeeper and fellow Jew or to a Roman officer, before the chief priests of the Sanhedrin or before Roman procurators, Paul always spoke the gospel in boldness, never wavering in his mission and message. Going forward from here and eventually even in chains and under house arrest in Rome, Paul was enormously effective in carrying out his original commission to take the gospel to the nations.

Study Questions:

1. Yeshua's warning in Matthew 23:27 about whitewashed tombs was directed at the Scribes and Pharisees of his day. Paul, on the other hand, directs his rebuke to the Sadducean priesthood. How are these two situations similar? How are they different?
2. Compare this appearance of Paul before the Sanhedrin with the earlier appearance of Peter, John and the other apostles found in Acts chapter 5.
3. Acts 23:11 accounts a visitation by the LORD to Paul in the night. How does this compare with previous visitations? How does this serve to strengthen Paul's resolve to carryout his mission?
4. It appears that Paul had many friends and acquaintances as members of the Sanhedrin. How would Paul's previous work on behalf of the Sanhedrin help him in this situation? How would it hinder him?
5. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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ⁱ 2 Macaabees 6:1, 11:25, also 3&4 Maccabees

ⁱⁱ Josephus, Life 1:12/i.2.

ⁱⁱⁱ B. Arakhin 16b;b. Sanhedrin 58b

^{iv} Josephus, Jewish War 2:441/xvii.9.

^v Josephus, Jewish War 2:166/viii.14.

^{vi} FFOZ. The Chronicles of the Apostles, D.T. Lancaster, Vol.3 p774