

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 49, Chapter 23

Back in Acts chapter 19 we read this:

Acts 19:21 CJB ²¹ *Some time later, Sha'ul decided by the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and then go to Yerushalayim. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome."*

What we have been studying ever since then is the route, full of twists and turns, that will indeed eventually bring Paul to Rome. Today in Acts chapter 23 we'll continue to follow the circumstances that would lead Paul to a city he says he "must visit". Those circumstances are of course invisibly God directed and orchestrated. In fact, in Acts 27 we read this:

Acts 27:23-24 CJB ²³ *For this very night, there stood next to me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve.* ²⁴ *He said, 'Don't be afraid, Sha'ul! you have to stand before the Emperor.*

It was important for Paul to go to Rome because it was important to God; I doubt that Paul had any idea why it was so important. And no doubt when Paul first voiced his unction to visit Rome, he thought it would be to evangelize the Gospel of Yeshua just as he had in so many other cities of the vast Roman Empire. I'm certain that he expected to speak to Jews, in their synagogues, in this great city. But as often happens with Believers, when we say yes to God the outcome and the path to get to the goal can be significantly different from our wildest expectations. Paul was going to stand before governors, kings, and even the Emperor; something that was not on his agenda. However God never said that the circumstances that enabled this audience with the powerful elite of the Roman Empire would be especially pleasant. In fact, a prophet named **Agav** specifically told Paul that Jerusalem would be the beginning point of his journey, but that it would be as a persecuted person under arrest and not as one traveling as a welcomed emissary.

Why was Rome so important to God? Other than an opportunity for Paul to speak to the gentile heads of Roman government about God's plan of redemption and the purpose of the Jewish people, we're not specifically told. However in retrospect I think we can reasonably assume that it had at least as much to do with the historical reality that within a few decades after Paul's martyrdom, with the Jerusalem Temple destroyed, the Jewish leadership of The Way either dead or scattered, and gentiles finally in full control of the Jesus movement, the headquarters of the gentile Christian Church would be in Rome. It is fascinating that the **gentile** Christian Church institution would become situated at the capital and center of **gentile** world government as envisioned by the prophet Daniel. And it would remain that way right on through today, and will continue until Messiah returns to institute a theocratic world government back in Jerusalem where it all began.

Let's read Acts chapter 23 together.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 23 all

Paul is before the Sanhedrin defending himself against some vague charges of blasphemy; although the Roman tribune who has custody of Sha'ul still isn't sure exactly what it is that Paul has said or done that has so many Jews in Jerusalem in such a homicidal mood. Here I'd like to speculate that what we're witnessing is not actually the common, everyday variety of Holy Land Jews who want to tear Paul to shreds, but rather it is members of the party or faction called the Zealots. The Zealots were Jewish super-nationalists; so they hated gentiles with a passion, openly preached civil disobedience and revolt against Rome, and expected every Jew to observe **Halakhah** (Jewish Law) down to the last detail as proof of their loyalty to their Jewish heritage. An even more violent and murderous faction called the Sicarri were an offshoot of the Zealots. I think it is probable that Christ's traitorous disciple Judas was a Zealot.

The point is this: it has been difficult for Jewish and Christian scholars alike to pinpoint exactly what crime Paul had committed that these Jews were openly determined to kill him for, and therefore what he was trying to defend himself against. We know that the accusation is more or less that of blasphemy; but how or when, precisely, did Paul blaspheme? Thus in verse one (to paraphrase) Paul says to the Sanhedrin that he has lived his life with a perfectly good conscience before God. This brought on an instant reaction by the High Priest who ordered someone standing next to Paul to strike him on the mouth.

We see two charges against him listed by Luke and both are discussed in Acts 21: first, James says that **Sha'ul** is being accused by some Jews of teaching against circumcision (for Jews), which is considered as a crime against **Mosheh**, and that he spoke against the Traditions. Second is that a person on pilgrimage to Jerusalem from Asia (for the occasion of Shavuot) says that Paul spoke against the Temple even bringing a gentile into the Temple thus defiling the sacred building and its holy grounds. According to the Biblical Law of Moses, there is no death penalty for teaching against circumcision or for not being circumcised. And Biblically speaking it is not a capital crime to bring a gentile into the Temple courtyard area or to speak against the Temple. But Jewish Tradition, especially that of the Judean Jews, had made it a capital crime.

I have discussed with you in past lessons that it is vital, especially when reading and interpreting Paul in Acts or in any of his letters, to understand that he uses the vernacular and common speech of his day. Only rarely is Paul ever technical or highly academic or does he offer minute nuances as he discusses the Torah versus Jewish Traditions and customs. So we must carefully consider the circumstances when we get into these issues of accusations of breaking the law, or speaking against the law, or when someone is accused of blasphemy. We must always ask: who are the parties that are contending with one another? Who is being accused and who is doing the accusing? Where is the scene of the action occurring (because that also plays a significant role)? Blasphemy was not usually a technical theological term in those days; it really was more of a nasty epithet thrown at someone who you strongly disagreed with concerning doctrines of Judaism.

So the bottom line is that Paul had greatly irritated the super-nationalist Zealots (who were easily irritated), and they stirred up many other Jews mostly because Paul dutifully took the Jewish message of a Jewish Messiah who gave salvation and offered it to the hated gentiles. And the Zealots' response to most problems that raised their passions was to kill the person they disagreed with and to characterize the deed as their pious obligation as defenders of the God of Israel. But in reality they were not defending God's Word, they were defending Jewish Law, *Halakhah*, which had been formulated in the institution of the synagogue. They were more defenders of manmade customs and traditions than actual Biblical commandments. And this was because they were first and foremost, in these unbearable days of occupation by Rome, defenders of Jewishness and all that it entailed. But Paul was seen as fraternizing with the enemy, and so that made him a target.

While Christians have for centuries shaken our collective heads and heaved heavy sighs at such a terrible attitude of the Jews towards gentiles and towards Christianity, let me point out that Christianity stands at the head of the list when it comes to defending manmade religious traditions and doctrines far more than defending what God commands in His Bible. Let's be honest about this: the reality is that long ago Christianity declared God's Biblical commands as null and void, so mostly what is left for the Church to defend is manmade doctrines and traditions. But just as with the Zealots and other Jews in Paul's day, Christians nonetheless claim that these manmade doctrines and traditions so closely reflect God's Word that they are essentially one in the same. We are reading about the result of such a religious worldview here in Acts 23, and it is endangering Paul's life. It is the same religious worldview that drove the Christian Crusades of a thousand years ago, the Inquisition of 500 years ago, and it drives the fractious, casual and indifferent nature of the Church in modern times.

As a middle-aged former Catholic (who now holds to no faith at all) recently told me, for him to consider a return to Christianity it would take a great modernization of Christianity so that it would become relevant to him and to his family and to humanity in tangible ways. I told him that I largely agreed with him and that is exactly what Seed of Abraham Ministries is all about. It is only that the route to modernization of Christianity is an irony; the way forward is to go back to our roots: our Hebrew roots. We must return to the perspective of the earliest days of our faith when Yeshua walked this earth, and when Paul, Peter, and James led the Believing community. Back to a time when the Holy Scriptures were the source of truth; when our doctrines were at their purest, when holiness was pursued relentlessly, and when doing was as important as being for followers of Messiah Yeshua.

As Acts 23 opens Paul is addressing himself to the members of the Sanhedrin; however it doesn't appear that this was a formal court gathering as much as an ad hoc council of inquiry quickly assembled. Lysias, the Roman Commander, had ordered the Sanhedrin to question Paul, so this was by no means a formal trial. In reality this council was there to ascertain exactly what, if any, charges were to be brought against Paul so that Lysias could understand what the hubbub was all about. Paul begins by not so much declaring his innocence (innocent of what?), but rather he declared his loyalty to the God of Israel and therefore to his Jewish heritage, reflected by a lifetime of proper behavior; thus his conscience was clear. It was a general assertion about his character; not a denial of formal charges since at this point the potential charges were still being ascertained.

Verse 2 says that the High Priest **Hananyah** (Ananias in Greek) instructed someone standing next to Paul to hit him on his mouth for daring to assert his good character. It must be understood that the point of hitting him in such a manner was to shame Paul. In the Middle East then, as now, a male being struck on the face caused the recipient of the blow to lose his honor; an extremely serious and volatile matter in oriental society. Paul turned and railed at the High Priest and called him a whitewashed wall. The idea is that whitewash is a thin façade that covers over the reality of what's underneath it. And then Paul has the **chutzpah** to tell Hananyah that God will strike him back, and this because the High Priest is supposed to be the supreme authority on the Torah but here, before charges are made, before a trial, Paul is treated as though he is guilty of something and essentially punished; something that the Torah doesn't permit. Some other men standing nearby rebuke Paul by saying how dare he speak to the High Priest in such a way. Paul goes on to say that he didn't know that this man was the High Priest and quotes the Torah commandment that instructs that any ruler of the Jews should be talked to with respect.

Although we could spend a long time dealing with the matter, I'll make it fairly brief. What about Paul's words offended the High Priest? And how can it be that Paul didn't know that this man was the High Priest? Might Paul have caught himself and realized he had done wrong in his insult, and so made up the flimsy excuse that he didn't know that this man was the High Priest? Modern scholars have wrestled so much with this that many are ready to throw out Acts chapter 23 altogether as being so improbable that it doesn't belong in the Bible. Others have said that Paul did wrong, and he sullied his Apostolic credentials by reacting in such a way towards the High Priest; as a Christian he should have accepted the shame and responded with silence, usually citing Jesus as one who was even spat on but said nothing. Interestingly when we check with the Scriptures we see that Yeshua had something similar happen to Him as is happening to Paul. Let's see how He responded to it.

John 18:19-23 CJB

¹⁹ ***The cohen hagadol questioned Yeshua about his talmidim and about what he taught.***

²⁰ ***Yeshua answered, "I have spoken quite openly to everyone; I have always taught in a synagogue or in the Temple where all Jews meet together, and I have said nothing in secret;***

²¹ ***so why are you questioning me? Question the ones who heard what I said to them; look, they know what I said."***

²² ***At these words, one of the guards standing by slapped Yeshua in the face and said, "This is how you talk to the cohen hagadol?"***

²³ ***Yeshua answered him, "If I said something wrong, state publicly what was wrong; but if I was right, why are you hitting me?"***

So Yeshua, speaking to the High Priest, certainly had something to say about being unjustly struck. And like Paul He was struck on the face, which was intended to shame Him. Notice that

Yeshua doesn't appear to have said anything against the High Priest anymore than Paul did. Yeshua merely asked why they were questioning Him, while Paul only stated his own good Jewish character. But in both cases this was seen as an affront to the High Priest. I believe I can address this rather forthrightly. Yeshua was dealing with Caiaphas and Paul was dealing with Ananias, the 8th High Priest to follow Caiaphas. Both men were illegitimate High Priests; they were not of the proper lineage. They were wealthy and had paid large sums of money to the Roman authorities for their positions. They were aristocrats, Sadducees, the highest class of society who saw themselves as entitled and far better than common Jews. So for Yeshua and now Paul to say anything before them or to them was an affront. And although it wouldn't hold true for Yeshua, Paul was a Pharisee; a direct competitor and antagonist to the Sadducees. They inherently didn't like one another.

So after Paul is hit on his mouth he spontaneously spews an insult towards this illegitimate High Priest Ananias calling him a whitewashed wall; a fake, a phony. But then Paul seems to back down when he is chastised for his retort by saying he didn't know that this man was the High Priest. First of all, the High Priest at all times was identifiable by his special garments; so the thought that some scholars have that Paul had not been to Jerusalem in a long time, and a number of High Priests had come and gone since his last visit, so he truly didn't know what the High Priest looked like, just doesn't pass the smell test for me. Paul of course knew who he was dealing with. I think Paul was only being Paul; he could be harsh and sarcastic on occasion. He had no respect for this fake High Priest, and it is my contention that by saying he didn't know he was the High Priest it was a heavy dose of sarcasm. And in responding to the others who chastised Paul for his strong words towards the High Priest, Paul quotes Exodus 22:27, but he does it in a way that essentially says that since one isn't supposed to speak disparagingly against a ruler, then the fact that he was brought to task for his words must mean that this man is a ruler; but that's the only way he'd know it because the High Priest certainly doesn't behave like a ruler. This entire exchange was tongue in cheek, a battle of wits. And let's always remember that Paul was just a man; he wasn't perfect nor did he have Christ's perfect character or disposition. Perhaps by the letter of the law Paul sinned in his harsh words to Ananias; but I see it as calling a spade a spade even if it might have been better left unsaid. On the other hand, I'm a bit biased; I see Paul as a kindred spirit if not kindred temperament, so maybe he just did what I think I would have done (and felt not a twinge of guilt over it) and I'm rationalizing!

But now the clever Paul changes tactics; his sarcasm turns to artful calculation. Having served on the Sanhedrin in some capacity in the past, he knows how they work and how they think. And he is well aware of the animosity between its Sadducean members and its Pharisaical members. So he announces himself as a Pharisee, even the son of a Pharisee, and throws out the hot-button issue of resurrection from the dead like a piece of raw meat unexpectedly thrown into a den of starving lions. In fact he frames the persecution he is undergoing on this very issue. This instantly puts the Pharisees on the Sanhedrin in a bind; if they find fault with Paul, then they must go against their own doctrines concerning resurrection. Immediately there erupted a loud and heated argument between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. This is because the Pharisees believed in the possibility of bodily resurrection from the dead, while the Sadducees stood firmly against it. There were other strong differences as well. I'd like to quote Josephus who explains the crux of the differences between the Sadducees' and the

Pharisees' theological doctrines, as they are quite instructional for those who study the New Testament.

“Of the two first-named schools, the Pharisees, who are considered the most accurate interpreters of the law, and hold the position of the leading sect, attribute everything to Fate and to God; they hold that to act rightly or otherwise rests, indeed, for the most part with men, but that in each action Fate cooperates. Every soul, they maintain, is imperishable, but the soul of the good alone pass into another body, while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment.....the Pharisees had passed on to the people certain regulations handed down from former generations and NOT recorded in the Laws of Moses, for which reason they are rejected by the Sadducean group, who hold that only those regulations should be considered valid which were written down in Scripture, and that those which had been handed down by former generations need not be observed. And concerning these matters the two parties came to have controversies and serious differences, the Sadducees having the confidence of the wealthy alone but no following among the populace, while the Pharisees have the support of the masses.”

Every child attending Sunday School has heard of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. But it is long past the time for us to shuck off such simplistic notions that one group was good and the other bad. Paul was a Pharisee; in his own speech he describes himself as STILL a Pharisee. So first off let us agree that Paul saw no discrepancy in being both a Pharisee and a Believer in Christ. But let us also use what we have learned regarding the use of the term “law” in the New Testament. Josephus says that the Pharisees were considered the most studied and correct interpreters of the law; but then tells us that the Sadducees only accepted what Moses had written down in the Scriptures and their doctrines were built on that alone. So what we have here is that when Josephus employed the term law (nomos), he was referring to Jewish law, ***Halakhah***, and not to the Laws of Moses. He goes on to explain that the Pharisees followed certain regulations NOT found in the Law of Moses (the Torah). And that the Pharisees were accepted as the religious authorities of the vast majority of the masses of common Jews. Why is that? It is because of the synagogue system that was led by the Pharisees; a manmade alternative religious system (an alternative to the Temple), which employed a large and growing volume of manmade traditions and doctrines as the primary guide used to live-out their faith. Thus what the Pharisees believed is what the common masses of Jews (both inside the Holy Land and in the Diaspora) were taught was the true religion for the Jews. Later (well past New Testament times), this alternative religious system of the synagogue was given a name: Judaism.

The Sadducees, wealthy aristocrats who were the Temple authorities and formed most of the priesthood (the Temple and the Priesthood were the original God-made religious system of the Hebrews), claim that they rejected the traditions that the Pharisees taught and the masses adopted and instead they abided ONLY by the Torah (the Laws of Moses). On the surface that sounds like the right thing to do. Of course the fact that the High Priest had for over a hundred years become a ceremonial office open to the highest bidder, instead of being a hereditary position according to a specific line descended from Aaron, and due to their brazen thieving of the Temple treasury (and so much more offensive behavior) demonstrated the hypocrisy of their claim of pious fidelity to the Laws of Moses. So this was the condition of the religion of the

Hebrews all throughout the New Testament era and this context is the lens through which we must view every word uttered by Christ, Paul, Peter, James, Luke and all.

So armed with that understanding then we're not surprised at the great uproar that erupts at the Sanhedrin and the entire hearing devolves into a doctrinal brawl. Can't you just picture the bewildered Roman tribune Lysias standing there and observing the ruckus; he came here for clarity from the best and wisest of the Jewish religious authorities about what it was that had set off the riot against Paul and now the council that was supposed to sort this out has dissolved into shouting and chaos (and no doubt in their native Hebrew language)? Lysias is at a loss for even understanding the nature of the dispute he is witnessing. What choice did the Pharisees on the Sanhedrin have at this point but to side with Paul, a fellow Pharisee, on the doctrine of resurrection (which for Paul was at the heart of the matter for believing upon Yeshua as the Messiah and Son of God)? In 1Corinthians Paul says this about resurrection:

1Corinthians 15:16-17 CJB

¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then the Messiah has not been raised either; ¹⁷ and if the Messiah has not been raised, your trust is useless, and you are still in your sins.

The Pharisees declare: "We don't find anything wrong with this man; and if a spirit or an angel spoke to him, what of it?" Oh, and by the way, the Sadducees also didn't believe in spirits or that angels had any interaction with humans. Are you getting the picture here? This theological warfare replaced whatever rational investigation Lysias was hoping for to figure out what Paul might have done to warrant a mob of Jews wanting to kill him. In fact the Sanhedrin got so out of control over the issue of resurrection that Lysias had to remove Paul from the scene before any harm came to him. Somehow I think as Paul was escorted away he had just the hint of a wry little smile upon his lips. Lysias has an unfixable mess on his hands; and when that happens there's only one solution: give it to your boss.

Verse 11 has Paul (still under arrest) ushered back to the barracks at the Antonia Fortress for his own safety, when suddenly the Lord comes to Paul in his cell and tells him to take courage because it is going to get a whole lot more interesting from here forward. Just as Paul has borne witness to the Gospel of Christ in Jerusalem, God is going to get him to Rome to do the same. What Paul had not realized before is that his passage to Rome would be as a prisoner. When the Lord wills that something happens, it happens. And as much as the Lord loved Paul, Paul's discomfort was of secondary concern when it comes to God achieving His purposes. This flies in the face of the modern Western Church's prosperity doctrine whereby God's purpose is make His Believers comfortable, happy, safe and wealthy. And I urge you that if you have been listening to any Preacher who teaches based on this doctrine that you turn away from it because it is a self-serving lie that makes Preachers wealthy and will do nothing but make you doubt your faith when loss of health, heartbreak or calamity eventually comes your way as it does to all of us at some time or another.

The next day the frustrated Jews who wanted Paul dead weren't about to give up. These Zealots made a new plan to get the Romans to take Paul out of the fortress and even though he will be escorted by a Roman guard, they plan on taking him and killing him. I think we need

to pause for a moment to grasp just how seriously dedicated these Zealots were. They knew for certain that many of them would die or be injured or arrested and probably executed for what they were planning to do. No doubt there would also be collective punishments of other Jews by the Roman government for such a defiance of Roman authority. But they were so passionate about defending their Jewishness, and about Jews (like Paul) consorting with gentiles as being tantamount to treason, that it was worth it to them to trade their lives for his death.

Starting at verse 12 we get some general details about this conspiracy as we learn that 40 men will lead the attack to take Paul. They swore an oath that they wouldn't eat or drink again until they had accomplished their goal. They went to the High Priest and some others of the Sanhedrin and told them of their plan because their cooperation was key to making it work. I'll point out the obvious: naturally they would not have gone to any Pharisees in the Sanhedrin because they sided with Paul. So that is why they went to the High Priest; he was a Sadducee and could control who got this information. The plot involves the High Priest sending a message to Lysias to say that they want Paul to come back so that they could continue their investigation. But on the short trip between the Antonia Fortress and the Hall of Hewn Stones where the Sanhedrin met, the conspirators would fall upon the Roman garrison, steal Paul away from them, and quickly kill him. Although it is not explicitly stated, clearly the High Priest and the Sadducees who sided with him went along with this plan (just a further sad indication of how corrupt and misguided the Jewish religious authorities had become).

In verse 16 we are introduced to a new character: Paul's nephew, the son of his sister, who apparently lived in Jerusalem. Here we learn a little about Paul's family life, and as often happens with a bachelor, he becomes close to a nephew as a sort of surrogate son. In some unexplained way this nephew found out about this conspiracy against Paul and has the courage to reveal it to the Roman tribune to save his uncle. The sudden appearance of this unnamed nephew is yet another reason why many modern Scripture commentators feel that the account of Acts chapter 23 is so suspect that it ought to be removed in part or in full from the Book of Acts. One part of their discomfort with this nephew is just how he, assuredly a rather young Pharisee, would get wind of what must have been a carefully guarded secret known only to the Zealots, the High Priest, and few hand-selected Sadducean Sanhedrin members. I don't know why Luke doesn't tell us more details about the incident. Perhaps he could never ascertain how the nephew got his information; but that is no reason to disbelieve the account. I can easily understand how if the Sadducee camp or even the Zealots had been infiltrated by someone who fed information to the Pharisees, a chronicler of the event (like Luke) would not have been told who the source was or how it happened; only *what* happened. So there is any number of good reasons why Luke didn't give us details regarding the information about the plot that Paul's nephew had obtained.

It is fairly clear that this nephew is a young person, probably a teen or in his early 20's. He must not have seemed very threatening or he wouldn't have been allowed access to the fortress to speak with Paul and then with Lysias. The nephew told his conspiracy story first to his uncle and then to the Roman tribune. Lysias obviously believed the young man. Especially after witnessing the almost irrational animosity and violent tempers flare even among the members of the Sanhedrin, it was not a hard sell to imagine that the Zealots would try

something almost suicidal in order to kill Paul. Lysias told the young man to tell no one that he had informed the Romans about it. It was time to get Paul away from here.

The commander quickly summons two centurions and tells them to get some foot soldiers, cavalry, and spear carriers ready for a fast march to Caesarea Maritima, the provincial capital; they would leave at the 3rd hour of the night. Although our CJB says that this is 9 p.m. it is likely somewhat later. Remember, this all happened in conjunction with the Shavuot festival that comes in early summer so the daytime would last until around 8 p.m. or so. The Romans divided the day into two parts: daytime and nighttime, and then assigned 12 hours of daytime and 12 hours of nighttime. So a Roman hour was only a division of time as opposed to a standard measurement of time. Thus if we have, for instance, a summer day with 15 hours of daylight but only 9 hours of darkness, then the 15 hours of daylight is divided into 12 parts, just as the 9 hours of darkness is divided into 12 parts. Each of the 12 parts is called an hour even though a Roman "hour" at night was of shorter duration than a Roman hour of daytime. And the length of an hour would also vary day by day as each season produced more or fewer daylight hours. Thus in the New Testament trying to ascertain a time according to our modern clocks can be a bit daunting, especially when a Roman "hour" was not the same as a Hebrew hour because the Hebrews divided their day differently than the Romans. Here it seems clear that since this activity involved Romans, it was the Roman hour being used. So the 3rd hour at night would have been somewhere between 11 and 12 midnight at that time of year, according to modern time standards. Clearly Lysias didn't want the Zealots to know that anything was happening until after they were long gone. And from the large count of the soldiers that we are given, the size of the contingency was sufficient to fight off the 40 Zealots even if they enlisted additional comrades.

We'll continue with Paul's perilous journey to Rome next time.