

A Study in Acts

Chapter Twenty-Three – Paul’s Defense to the Sanhedrin.

ACTS 23:1-10:

In our previous lesson, Paul was allowed to give a defense of himself before the Jews that were attempting to drag him out of the temple and kill him. This defense was allowed by the commander of the garrison in order to determine who Paul was and why the Jews wanted to kill him. The defense was carefully listened to, as Paul spoke to the crowd in Hebrew, until he said the word ‘gentile’. Then once again, the crowd wanted him dead (22:22-23). The commander found out that Paul was a Roman, and becoming desperate to find out more about him, he has assembled the chief priests and the council (22:30), in order to see if he can’t learn more about Paul.

Text #1

Acts 23:1-5 *“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.³ Then Paul said to him, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?”*

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.’”* Exodus 22:28

Ananias – This high priest is a usurper of that role and one of the vilest men to hold the position of high priest among the Jews. He was historically recorded as having practiced extortion and other crimes while in office. This may explain why Paul did not know him to be the high priest.

Contrary to the Law – Paul accuses the high priest of commanding him struck against the Law.

Leviticus 19:35 *“You shall do no injustice in judgment, in measurement of length, weight, or volume.”*

Deuteronomy 25:1-3 *““If there is a dispute between men, and they come to court, that the judges may judge them, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked,² then it shall be, if the wicked man deserves to be beaten, that the judge will cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence, according to his guilt, with a certain number of blows.³ Forty blows he may give him and no more, lest he should exceed this and beat him with many blows above these, and your brother be humiliated in your sight.”*

I Did Not Know – Paul will at a later date, write to the Christians in Rome and command that *“Every soul be subject to the governing authorities”* – **Romans 13:1**. Here, we see Paul living by the very words that he would later share with brethren. He is being subject, in no unique way than the Apostles in **Chapter 4:19; 5:29**. Paul is simply saying, had he known that Ananias was

the high priest, he would not have spoken so harshly concerning him, but would have pointed out the breach in the Law regardless.

Text #2

Acts 23:6-9 *“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. 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.””

Note: before we get into the specifics of this section, Paul will use his knowledge of the makeup of the council and introduce something that they did not know about him. Remember why he is even here, **Chapter 21:28**. Yet, he is someone who was just like them for so long, but has seen a drastic change in his life (transformation by the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ).

Sadducees – The origin of this sect of Jews is uncertain, but we see mention of them being introduced during the period of silence, yet after the mention of Pharisees. This may indicate that they were born in opposition to the Pharisees as an origin, which seems to be supported by the contrary practices to everything the Pharisees say or do (except hating Jesus).

The best well of knowledge we have apart from what Paul shares with us here is Josephus and the Talmud. Josephus lays great stress upon the aristocratic nature of the Sadducees. Josephus quotes, *“They only gain well-to-do; they have not the people on their side.”*

They are far more political than the Pharisees (even though the Pharisees have far more weight with the people), and the High Priests are always supported by them, especially since the priests have become political.

They did hold to the written Law and purposefully restricted the traditions of the Pharisees. Josephus quotes, *“The Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the Law of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them.”* (Antiq. xiii. 10,6).

Here Paul shares another doctrinal difference between the two groups, he states that the Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection after death. We see this in the challenge levied by them to Jesus – see **Matthew 22:23-33**.

In addition, Luke shares their denial of angels and spirits. I am reminded of a straightforward way to remember the simple doctrinal differences between the two groups. The Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection, angels, or spirits and that is SAD YOU SEE. However, Pharisees believe in them all and that is FAIR YOU SEE.

Pharisees – The most prominent sect of the Jews found in your New Testaments. They were the most influential group among the people and were perceived to be the spiritually conservative sect. Their very name, in its Semitic form meant, ‘the separated ones’. These were the foremost progenitors of Hebrew legalism, traditions, and commandments of men (**Matthew 15:7-9**).

The origin of the Pharisees is as mysterious as that of the Sadducees, and the only thing that can be established with any certainty, is that they predate the Sadducees. There is historic references to a group that existed going all the way back to the Babylonian exile that resembles the Pharisees in practice, they were known as the, ‘*Chasidim*’, which means, ‘*Loved of God*’. It is believed that the formation of what we see at the coming of Jesus came out of the Maccabean revolt (165 BC).

They are believed to be responsible for the development and organization of the Mosaic Law by scribe and rabbi practices (one of the reasons we always see the scribes associated with the Pharisees), which in turn created increased tradition and separation from the true meaning of the Law into, instead, that which was far more measurable by the standards of men. This is seen in the early attacks by the Pharisee against Jesus doing good works on the Sabbath day (**Matthew 12:1-8; Luke 6:1-5; 6-11**, as just one example).

These practices would lead to an iconic oral indictment by Jesus Himself in **Matthew 23**. Here, Paul shares that he was one of them, early on, and that it was his belief in the resurrection that he is being judged!

Text #3

Acts 23:10 “*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.*”

The Pharisees siding with Paul (**Vs. 9**) in a comparable way as Gamaliel in **Chapter 5:38-39**, is going to cause the other side to become frenzied in their rage. This gives us some insight to the very bitter divides that these two parties had and how vicious they could be in fighting against anything the other did or said.

The commander, fearing, once again, is going to remove Paul from their presence and take him to the barracks in hopes of defusing this ruckus. Sadly, at the end of this exercise, the commander is no better off than he was before.