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Acts 23:1-35

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Pastor Gary Hamrick

### Exegetical Study

1. **Acts 23:1-11** – *“Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, ‘My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.’ At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, ‘God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!’ Those who were standing near Paul said, ‘How dare you insult God’s high priest!’ Paul replied, ‘Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: “Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.” Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, ‘My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.’ When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.) There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. ‘We find nothing wrong with this man,’ they said. ‘What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?’ The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks. The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’ ”*
  - a. The Sanhedrin was a Jewish religious ruling council of seventy men.
  - b. The High Priest was the chairman of the board, so to speak.
  - c. Paul was at one time a member of the Sanhedrin.
    - i. Paul addressed the Sanhedrin as *“my brothers.”*

- ii. If he had never been a member of the Sanhedrin and he would have addressed them as “my fathers.”
- d. We also learn from the inference that Paul had been a member of the Sanhedrin, that Paul was married at one time because that was a requirement.
  - i. Many Bible scholars believe that Paul’s wife left him when he became a follower of Christ.
- e. Conscience<sup>1 2</sup>
  - i. Paul wrote about conscience twenty-one of the twenty-nine times this word is used in the New Testament.
  - ii. Conscience is the inner judge or witness that approves when we do right or disapproves when we do wrong. It is our moral faculty.
  - iii. It’s an internal mechanism of God-awareness.
  - iv. New Testament Examples
    1. Good Conscience
      - a. **Acts 23:1** – *“Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, ‘My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.’ ”*
    2. Clear Conscience
      - a. **Acts 24:16** – *“So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.”*
    3. Weak Conscience
      - a. **1 Corinthians 8:10** – *“For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?”*
    4. Guilty Conscience
      - a. **Hebrews 10:22** – *“[Let] us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...”*
    5. Corrupted Conscience
      - a. **Titus 1:15** – *“To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and their consciences are corrupted.”*
    6. Seared Conscience
      - a. **1 Timothy 4:2** – *“Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.”*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G4893&t=NIV>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.studylight.org/dictionaries/ved/c/conscience.html>

- v. Pastor Gary said, “[When] it comes to your conscience, [the worst thing] is to have a dead conscience. Don’t feel badly if sometimes you have a guilty conscience; that’s a good thing, friends. That’s the way the Lord gets our attention about something that is wrong. It’s a built-in mechanism. It’s a God-awareness. Understand, everyone is born with a conscience. You don’t have to become a Christian to have a conscience. ... What’s the difference between a conscience and the Holy Spirit? The difference is that the conscience that we are all born with is a moral compass... when you become a Christian, the Holy Spirit heightens your conscience so that now you would have a more sensitive conscience than you ever did before. [The] Spirit within you bears witness to what is right and wrong. So then, you become even more aware of right and wrong, more sensitive instead of desensitized to [right and wrong]. ... [There are people] in the world who have no conscience. They are called either a psychopath or a sociopath by medical diagnosis. [These people] have no remorse, [guilt, or shame], and they do whatever they want. Some of the most horrible criminals in our culture are psychopaths or sociopaths. ... The moral compass is broken [in these people]. God has given you a conscience. Don’t violate it... because if you continue to violate [your conscience] over long periods of time, if you violate your conscience, you will eventually become so desensitized to [your conscience] that you won’t recognize [what is right and what is wrong].”
  - 1. In the 1830s this was called moral insanity.
  - 2. In the early 1900s this was called psychopathic personality.
- f. There are a few explanations regarding how it was that Paul didn’t recognize the High Priest.
  - i. It’s possible that Paul had poor eyesight from previous injuries.
    - 1. [Galatians 6:11](#) - *“See what large letters I use to write to you with my own hand!”*
    - 2. [2 Corinthians 12:7-9](#) - *“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ ”*
  - ii. It’s possible that Paul didn’t recognize him because he wasn’t acting like a High Priest, so Paul was being sarcastic.
    - 1. Ananias violated the law by ordering that Paul should be beaten even though he had not been found guilty.
    - 2. [Deuteronomy 25:2](#) - *“If the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make him lie down and have him flogged in his*

*presence with the number of lashes his crime deserves.”*

iii. It's possible that Paul acted impulsively by not considering that Ananias was the High Priest.

1. **Exodus 22:28** - *“Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people.”*

g. Pharisees v. Sadducees

i. Paul's strategy was to spark controversy between these two religious sects of Judaism.

h. Jesus ministered to Paul

i. Pastor Gary said, “This is one of those rare occasions when the Lord himself appeared to Paul. And I'm convinced that this was probably one of, if not the lowest points in Paul's life. Jesus doesn't just indiscriminately show up to places. These are very purposeful encounters, and for the Lord Jesus himself to visit Paul like this and to [tell him to be encouraged... probably indicates that this was a low point in Paul's life]. ... Low points are common in our lives. Low points happen to good, Godly people who love Jesus. They just do. I want you to be aware of something else... and this kind of confronts our taste for the instantaneous. ... Sometimes we have to realize that God doesn't always work that way. And so waiting sometimes becomes painful for us because we are so used to everything happening now. ... We need to be careful [to remember just because something doesn't happen now, that] it's a bad reflection on God. ... [Paul had to be patient because it would be two years before he would testify about Jesus in Rome]. [Like Paul, we have to be patient and trust the Lord].”

2. **Acts 23:12-22** - *“The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than forty men were involved in this plot. They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, ‘We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here.’ But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, ‘Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him.’ So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, ‘Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you.’ The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, ‘What is it you want to tell me?’ He said: ‘The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they*

have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request.' The commander dismissed the young man and cautioned him, 'Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me.' Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, 'Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. Provide mounts for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix.' He wrote a letter as follows: 'Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him.' So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris.<sup>3</sup> The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him. The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, he said, 'I will hear your case when your accusers get here.' Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace."

- a. Four hundred and seventy soldiers protected Paul from the forty Jews who plotted to kill Paul.
  - i. Pastor Gary said, "I like the way God works in our lives [in a natural way.] ... [Many times] we look for the supernatural. Do you know God can use natural means to minister to us, take care of us, [and] provide for us? That's what he's doing [in this situation]. Could God have sent an angel to just destroy forty people? ... That would have been a supernatural way, [but God chose to] dispatch four hundred and seventy Roman soldiers to help Paul. Look for God to help in the natural ways, not just the supernatural ways, because God works in both ways."
- b. Caesarea
  - i. Caesarea was at this time the capital of this region of the Roman Empire.
  - ii. Caesarea was approximately seventy miles north northwest of Jerusalem, located on the Mediterranean Sea.
- c. Felix
  - i. His birthname was Marcus Antonius Felix.
  - ii. Felix was the governor or procurator of Judea from 52 A.D. to 58 A.D.

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<sup>3</sup> Antipatras was approximately forty-two miles from Jerusalem. Antipatras to Caesarea was approximately twenty-eight miles. A trip of seventy miles in two days was quite an undertaking in that day.

- iii. Felix was a slave, and he is the first and only known person to have gone from being a slave to a governor in the Roman Empire.
- iv. Felix's brother, Pallas, was a good friend of Emperor Claudius, and he persuaded the emperor to make Felix governor.
- v. "He executes the prerogatives of a king with the spirit of a slave." – Tacitus
- vi. Felix was recalled to Rome in 58 A.D.

3. **Acts 24:1-27** - *"Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: 'We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly. We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him.' The Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true. When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: 'I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man. After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin- unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: "It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today." ' Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. 'When Lysias the commander comes,' he said, 'I will decide your case.' He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs. Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla,*

who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, 'That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.' At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison."

a. Resurrection

i. Paul stated his belief in the "resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked."

ii. Jesus said there is in fact be a resurrection that Paul referred to.

1. **John 5:28-29** - "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

b. Paul's Accusers

i. Paul's accusers were nowhere to be found.

1. **Acts 24:19** - "But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me."

c. Paul's Defenders

i. Pastor Gary said, "Where are Paul's defenders? I feel bad for Paul in this scene. Where are the apostles of the early Church at this point? Where are the people that he [had] led to the Lord who might want to come and be a witness for [Paul]? Nobody [is there for Paul], and it's sad. And you know this to be true. You will find out who your true friends are when you go through something difficult. You will always have friends when things are going well with you, but you will find out who your true friends are when things are going very, very difficult for you. Where are his friends? ... Of course, he's got the Lord. The Lord will never leave us nor forsake us."

d. Christianity

i. Pastor Gary said, "It is truly the resurrection that distinguishes Christianity from all other world religions, and that because Jesus lives, we also shall live, and the hope of the resurrection [is] extended to all those who believe in Christ... Don't buy into this [idea] that all religions are the same, [and] we worship the same god in different ways. No, we don't! We worship the true and living God, and the reason that Christianity is different and distinct from all other world religions is because the premise upon which Christianity is built is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which translates into our glorious resurrection from the dead. And Paul [said] that if Christ did not rise

from the dead, then [preaching and faith was] in vain. [If] you don't believe in the resurrection of Christ as the basis for everything else, then you are just a part of some effect-less religion. But because the fact is that Christ arose, and the hope of the resurrection is for all of us who believe in Christ; there is eternal life and we shall forever be with him. This is what makes Christianity unique and distinct... and this is the reason that Paul [was on trial].”

e. Drusilla

- i. Drusilla was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, who died when God struck him dead because of his pride. <sup>4</sup>
- ii. Drusilla was killed in Pompeii, Italy, when Mount Vesuvius erupted on August 24, 79 A.D. <sup>5</sup>

\* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the 1984 New International Version (NIV)

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<sup>4</sup> [Acts 12:19b-23](#)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/vesuvius-erupts>