

Parson to Person

TODAY'S STUDY: ACTS 23

"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" (Act 22:30).

Having returned to Jerusalem, Paul faced an angry mob of Jews on the Temple mount. They were about to beat him to death when the Roman soldiers (entrusted with keeping peace on the Holy site) stopped the action and promptly took Paul into custody. They thought he was the agitator/instigator.

During the arrest, Paul was granted permission to speak to the Jewish crowd only to inspire yet another outbreak of Jewish wrath. Facts being what they were, we learned that "People love to listen to what you have to say until you tell them what they don't want to hear."

The Romans, discovering that Paul was a Roman citizen, redirected their processes. At this point, they determined to take him before the Jewish council for examination. This group of men (among whom Paul once served) were all at odds with him—and he knew it.

"Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, 'Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.' And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. 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?' And those who stood by said, 'Do you revile God's high priest?' 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' " (Acts 23:1–5).

It is apparent that this was not a good start. Paul might be accused of using an old strategy in an effort to maintain his defense: "divide and conquer." But the result—though temporarily effective—did not accomplish Paul's desired end and ultimately failed.

"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! And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. 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.'

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" (Acts 23:6–10).

In the barracks at the Antonio Fortress, Paul heard a word from the Lord. This would have been great encouragement to Paul—as it would be to any of us. However, of interest to me is that while the word brought encouragement to Paul, it also provided a prophetic message concerning Paul's arrest and journey to Rome. I am sure he would have rather heard that he would be staying in Jerusalem and continuing what he had intended for his journey there.

"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' " (Acts 23:11).

Paul had gone to Jerusalem against many warnings. However, even then, while under Roman incarceration, God would nonetheless use Paul despite how he or others might have viewed his previous actions.

"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. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. 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. 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' " (Acts 23:12–15).

Irrational hatred for Paul so controlled these Jewish men that they pronounced a curse upon themselves. The oath they had taken was an "anathema." Essentially, it was a statement similar to the old adage "over my dead body."

It seems the hatred for Paul was not unlike the hatred the Jews had for Jesus: they cried out, "crucify him."

It is encouraging to know that when we are hated for Christ's sake, we are not alone. Let us remember to "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:12). I love you all, Pastor Paul