

## Thoughts on Acts Twenty-Three

This chapter of Acts contains the first of Paul's speeches before the leaders of the Jews and Romans. Luke writes that the high priest at the time was Ananias (Acts 23:2). This would be Ananias 2, who served in the reigns of Claudius from 41 to 54 CE and Nero from 54 to 58 CE. Verse 26 states that the governor is Felix. Antonius Felix was the 4th Roman procurator of Judea in 52–58. In chapter 24, we read, *"But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned"* (Acts 24:27). Festus came to Judea in 58 CE. Subtracting two years from 58 CE places Paul's arrest in about 55-56 CE.

Claudius Lysias (Act 23:26), the commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem, needed truthful reasons for Paul, a Roman citizen, to be in custody. By Roman judicial procedure, he brought Paul before his accusers, hoping to learn the basis for the Jew's accusations. Since he was the governor's official representative, he ordered the leaders of the Jews to assemble before himself and the accused (Acts 22:30). This hearing displayed the hypocrisy of the Jew's council. They had met unlawfully to try Jesus (John 18:19-24), and they assembled before the Romans to push their predetermined wish to execute Paul. They did not care for facts or explanations.

Paul gave careful attention to the council, seeing who was there and possibly, looking for a friendly face. By this time, Nicodemus and Joseph were gone, and no follower of the Way could be found in the assembly. Paul begins by stating that he lived as he had been taught as a Jew (Acts 23:1). *"I have lived, πεπολίτευμαι,"* carries the meaning of "living as a citizen, with special reference to the charge against him that he taught men against the law and the temple. He means he has lived as a true and loyal Jew" (VWS).

The reason Paul did not recognize the high priest is a mystery that is not explained. The important point is that the council was not assembled as usual when they were in authority but were "guests" of the Roman commander. We must remember that the Roman governor or commander held the High Priest's garments unless they were needed for specific sacrifices or feast days. So, the unlawful instructions of the high priest and Paul's reaction are understandable (Acts 23:2-5).

Paul used the divided nature of the council to his advantage to get at least half of them behind him by reminding the members of the Sanhedrin that he was a Pharisee. And that the basic charge against him was a primary belief of the Pharisees *"I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead"* (Acts 23:6)! The ensuing argument between the factions in the council resulted in the Pharisees declaring that "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" (Acts 23:9). The anger that developed among the Jews caused the commander to fear they would kill Paul there in the hearing room. He ordered his men to remove Paul to the safety of the barracks. That night, Paul was again reassured by Jesus, *"Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also"* (Acts 23:11).

*"When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who formed this plot"* (Acts 23:12-13). This vow was known by several people and was made known to Paul's nephew, who, in turn, told Paul and the Romans. Claudius Lysias responded by ordering two centurions to *"Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and*

*two hundred spearmen. They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor” in Caesarea (Acts 23:23-24).*

There are many things to be said for the deployment of 270 armed men on a six to nine-hour venture to protect a single Roman citizen and ensure any assassins were met and killed. It is a tactical military strategy at its best. But the point for the Bible Student is that God provides the means to accomplish anything He has commanded. God planned for Paul to go to Rome and explain the resurrected Christ to the emperor. He told Paul of that goal (V 11) and provided the means to deliver Paul safely into the Roman judicial and imperial systems.

The trial before Felix occurred five days after Paul arrived in Caesarea. It followed the order of an *“extra ordinem,”* where only the governor heard the case and could issue a verdict or postpone it as he saw fit. The Jews hired a lawyer to perform the oratory for them before the Roman official and possibly explain their attempted murder of Paul in Jerusalem should that subject arise. Paul only stated the facts. The historian Tacitus wrote, “Felix wields the power of a king with the instincts of a slave.” Felix could not decide and kept Paul imprisoned for Festus to deal with.