

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES -
PART TWENTYFOUR - CHAPTERS 23 AND 24

There was a striking contrast between Paul's manner before his various judges from chapter 22 to 26. The crowd in Jerusalem who a few minutes before had been trying to kill him were addressed sensitively and respectfully. (22:1) Now Paul stood before the Jewish Council, a group of men he would once have regarded as great men of God with enormous authority. He greeted them as brothers just as he did the crowd - but no more. He did not even give them the rather flattering address he later gave the governor (24:10) and the king (26:2). He honoured them as fellow Jews (I Pet.2:17) but it was quite clear that he had no respect for their organisation which he regarded not as 'a governing authority' (Rom.13:1) but as usurping Christ's position as God's High Priest.

Paul's testimony in verse 1 was not to his performance as a one time murderer but to the cleansing work of Jesus on the cross. Ananias was breaking the Old Testament instructions about a fair trial, and punishment only to those already convicted. (Lev.19:15; Deut.25:2) Paul did not hesitate to tell him so. (23:3) As usual he was not protecting himself but others who would be victims of the same abuse of power. Paul was obviously well aware that Ananias was the current high priest but took the opportunity to point out that he did not believe him to be God-appointed. (23:5) We do not have to crawl before self-appointed tyrants, even those in the church.

His next move brought chaos to the Council. With, I presume, a gleam in his eye Paul played what seemed like a game with his accusers. He turned one half of the Council against the other by exploiting the deep division between Pharisee and Sadducee over many issues including the resurrection. For Paul however it was no game but an issue of enormous importance. While he had come to regard his own background as a religious fanatic as 'rubbish', (Phil.3:4-8) he did not deny his former view, as a Pharisee, of Biblical inspiration. He believed they had missed the point of the Old Testament but he had not changed his mind about the Sadducees as a group of power hungry heretics. He demonstrated the hypocrisy of two such groups combining together against him as Jesus did on a previous occasion. (Matt.22:15-21) It is often an effective strategy with opponents of the gospel to show the contradictory nature of their position in the hope of opening their eyes to a better way. The plan worked and the meeting broke up. Again Paul had to be rescued while he was still alive! (23:6-11)

As often before and in the future, the Lord gave him special reassurance that He was in the tense and tangled situation, and that His purpose to get Paul to Rome would not be thwarted. (23:11) The Lord knows when we would appreciate being given some extra confidence and never fails to give it.

A group of religious extremists, similar to today's Islamic suicide bombers, committed themselves to getting past the proper legal process to kill Paul. The chief priest, who should have known better, went along with the plan and lied to the commander. His God was a cheat as well as a murderer! Forty was obviously too many to keep a secret so soon Paul's nephew knew of the plot and reported to Uncle Paul. This is one of the few glimpses of Paul's family and shows us that at least some of them came to know Christ. (23:12-16) Paul made the system work for him again and the plan to kill him was foiled. He knew he was going to get to Rome, not die in Jerusalem. The commander took great care of his prisoner probably more to protect his own reputation as a soldier rather than out of any great concern for Paul. (23:17-24)

The commander's letter to his superior gave him the basic facts of the case but subtly improved on them to cover his mistake in almost scourging Paul before he discovered he was a Roman citizen. He was probably delighted to be out of a

difficult situation. God uses men's imperfect motives to accomplish His perfect purpose. (23:25-33)

Paul took up residence in the royal palace dungeon which was to be his home for the next two years.

24:1 Q.1 How did the character of the court change when Ananias was the prosecutor instead of the judge? Why do you suppose he used a lawyer rather than speaking on his own behalf?

24:2,3 Q.2 Did the Jews believe their lawyer's opening words to the court? Could Ananias have spoken in this way? What was Tertullus' purpose? What does it show us about the insincerity of religious opposition to the gospel?

24:4-9 Q.3 What charges did Tertullus bring against Paul? Was there any truth in them? How did he want Felix to deal with the case? Was his description of Lysias' actions fair? What was he trying to cover up? What should we expect when we are persecuted? Will our accusers be fair and honest?

24:10-21 Q.4 What points did Paul make in his response to the charges against him? Why did he bother to answer the false charges? For whose benefit do you think he made his defence? What understanding would his reply give Felix of the gospel and his own need to be saved? What can we learn from Paul's example about how to deal with secular authorities? When is it worth speaking out and when is it better to remain silent? What phrase did Paul use to describe Christianity? (Acts 9:2; 19:9,23) Why was it such a good title to get the message across?

24:22-23 Q.5 What was the outcome of his first trial before Felix? How had God once more accomplished His purpose through unbelievers? Do you think Paul was disappointed with the verdict in his case?

24:24-27 Q.6 How was it that Felix, a Roman governor, knew so much about what the real issues were between the Jews and the Christians? Do you suppose that Drusilla had been faithful to her Jewish upbringing? What was going on inside Felix during these two years?

24:24-27 Q.7 What three issues did Paul choose to concentrate on in his talks with the governor and his wife? Why did he pick these things? How would they especially relate to Felix' role in Israel? Why did Paul not ask his friends to raise money to get him out of prison so that he could carry on with his missionary work?