Sanhedrin Scuffle and a "Dark Moment"

V 1-2 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.

Paul no sooner began to speak, than the *"high priest Ananias"* commanded him to be smitten *"on the mouth"* – a shocking way to start off the hearing. Although Paul was trying to put his best foot forward with integrity and sincerity, *"looking earnestly at the council"*, stating that he had *"lived in all good conscience before God"*, the High Priest was not the least bit interested in any kind of open discussion; his mind was made up and was not about to be confused with the facts, or with any of Paul's overtures that might lead to some form of reconciliation.

This vicious reaction by the High Priest certainly manifested the depth of intolerance and ill-will that the ruling Jews bore towards Paul, who years ago had defected from their ranks. In their minds he was a traitor who had begun the hated Gentile Christian movement. Ananias, one of Israel's cruelest and most corrupt high priests with his pro-Roman policies, so upset the Jews that they killed him in 66 A.D. at the onset of the Jewish revolt.

"Strike."* Same word used to describe the mob's *"beating"* of Paul (21:32). Likely, he received a vicious enough blow. According to Leviticus 19:15, Ananias' action was illegal: *"You shall do no injustice in judgment… In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor."

V 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?"

***"God shall strike you."* About eight years later Ananias was assassinated.**

***"You whitewashed wall."* Paul flared up in anger, not knowing he was addressing the high priest. Whitewashing could hide defects in the construction of a wall. (Ezekiel 13:10-16) Like the *"whitewashed wall"*, a**

priest who acts *"contrary to the law"* could hide his defects under the cover of the prestige of his office. *"Whitewashed"* was a metaphor for hypocrisy that Jesus also used to describe his religious enemies – as *"whitewashed tombs."* (Matthew 23:27) Paul detested the hypocrisy he sometimes encountered among his fellow Jews, and his feelings along those lines may be understood well from the Book of Romans, chapter 2.

V 4 And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?"

***"Do you revile God's high priest?"* They were quite taken aback by Paul's harsh rebuke of the high priest.**

V 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.'"

***"You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people."* (Exodus 22:28) Even though Ananias was quite worthy of the rebuke, nevertheless he was a ruler in authority, respected by his own people, and should have been granted the respect that his position demanded.**

We could compare this to how David behaved with King Saul. David could have killed Saul but refused to take matters into his own hands. Despite Saul's jealous, vindictive attitude towards David, David continued to recognize him as the *"Lord's anointed"*. (1Sam 24:10)

It was needful to maintain stability in the kingdom, to wait for the Lord's ideal timing when power could more easily be transferred from the house of Saul to the house of David without a lot of bloodshed. In a similar manner, Paul showed due respect for the ruler of the Israelites; he quickly realized his mistake and apologized: *"I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest."*

V 6 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!"

***"The council."* The Sanhedrin, the same group that had crucified Jesus and stoned Stephen and had always fought against the activities of the**

Early Church. By now Paul realized he wasn't going to get a fair hearing from them, so he took a bold course of action. Knowing something about the inner tensions between the Sanhedrin's two factions, he appealed to the Pharisees, reminding them that he too was a Pharisee and that *"of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged".*

This was the main bone of theological contention between the two factions. Paul was not just using this as a ploy; belief in the resurrection of the dead was central to both Pharisees and Christians – which is why many Pharisees (but not Sadducees) converted to faith in Christ. (Acts 6:7, 15:5, John 3:1)

V 7-8 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.

***"A dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees."* The Pharisees followed many legalistic rituals and traditions and believed in the afterlife and resurrection.**

***"The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection – and no angel or spirit."* The Sadducees accepted only the Pentateuch (five books of Moses) and thought there was no mention there of the resurrection and went on to deny anything supernatural, such as the existence of angels or the afterlife. (Jesus skillfully corrected their wrong doctrinal thinking on this in Matthew 22:23-33.)**

The Sadducees were often wealthy aristocrats, compromisers for gain and political opportunists. They were the "liberals", rationalists who looked down on religious tradition and legalism, which they felt sprang from the Pharisees' "superstitions".

The only thing that united the two groups was their opposition to Jesus and the early church; the Pharisees felt threatened on the religious level, and the Sadducees on the political level. With this kind of status quo club pursuing its own interests and opposing what He stood for – truth, love, and the change that mankind so desperately needed – it is no wonder Jesus referred to them as a *"brood of vipers"*. (Matthew 23:33)

This collaboration between Pharisees and Sadducees continues nowadays in the form of an unholy alliance between church and state. As the Pharisees did then, so nowadays do certain sectors of Christianity abandon their core principles in order to gain the favor of the warmongers and rulers of secular society, the modern day Sadducees.

V 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."

***"The scribes of the Pharisees' party."* So intense was the theological dispute that the Pharisees were even willing to defend Paul. Even though he was a leader of the hated, new sect of Gentile Christians, the Pharisees did share the same fundamental beliefs, which they, along with Paul, cherished greatly. Although Paul was using a "divide and conquer" strategy, it was also a needed challenge to certain members of the council to shake off compromise and stand up for their beliefs.**

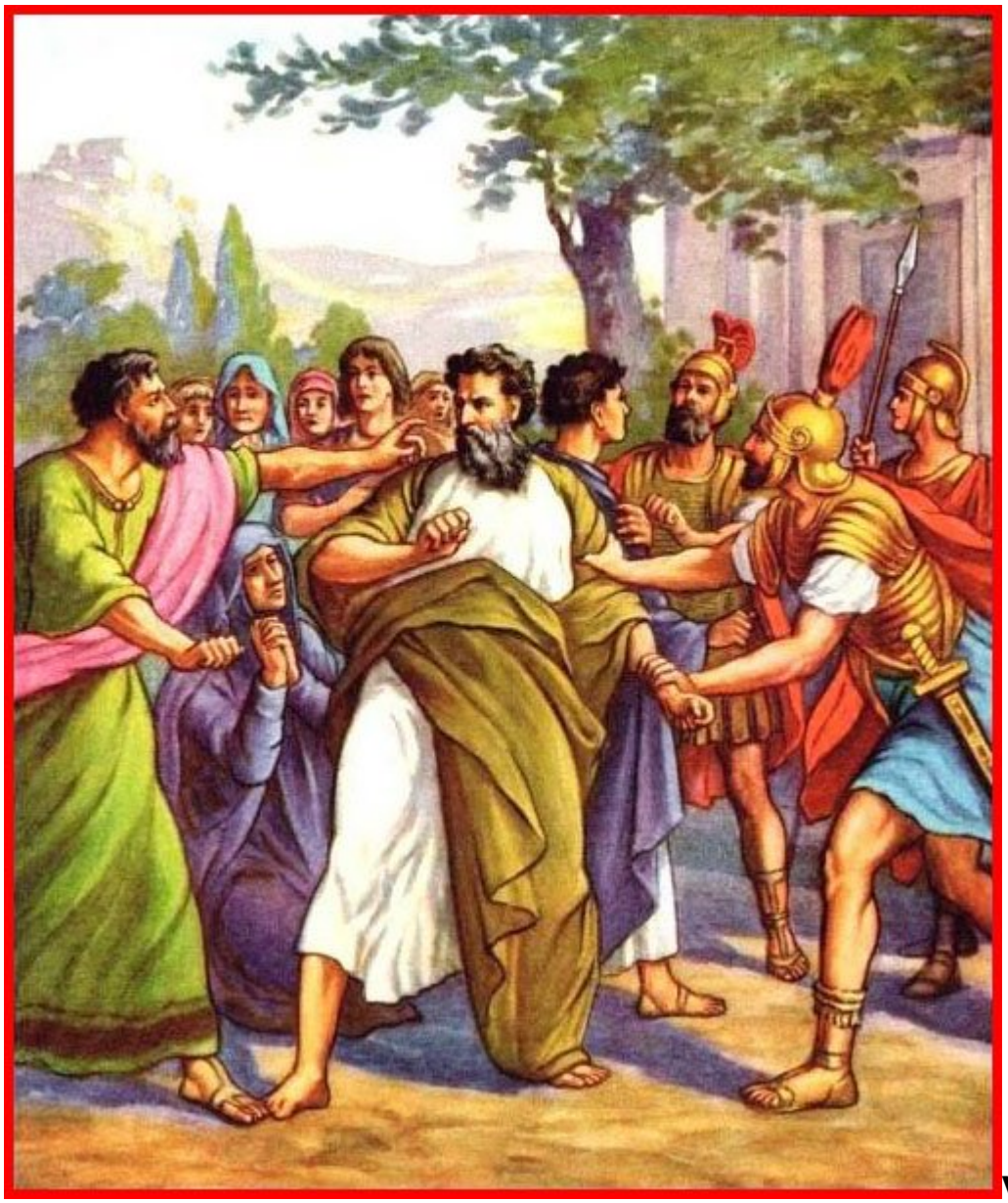
***"We find no evil in this man… let us not fight against God."* This reminds us of Gamaliel's warning several years earlier to the council when it wanted to kill the first apostles: *"Take heed to yourselves… keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work… is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you even be found to fight against God."* (Acts 5:35,38,39)**

Thankfully, many of these rulers, even though they had gone somewhat astray into the realm of power politics, still had a conscience toward God. This fear of displeasing God kept them in check – just enough to keep the first apostles, and now Paul, alive and free to continue their work.

V 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.

***"Fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces."* The dissension within the Sanhedrin that had been brewing and suppressed for so long now broke to the surface in an explosive confrontation. Passions got so enflamed, even violent – presumably as they fought over Paul – that the chief captain had**

to again rescue him from being *"pulled to pieces"*.



V 11 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."

***"The Lord stood by him and said, Be of good cheer."* Paul probably needed the encouragement as he may have felt quite disappointed with the negative and hostile reaction of the Jews whom he had been hoping,**

naively it would seem, to win over. This last antagonistic reaction of the Sanhedrin dashed to pieces any hope that the Jews as a nation could be won to Christ – although they could still be won on an individual basis of course.

Also, it may have been dawning on him that he had made some serious errors in judgment, giving no heed to the Lord's and his counselors' warnings not to go to Jerusalem.

Men of God throughout history often had to face these dark moments as a result of their errors: Moses in the wilderness, Samson blinded and thrown into the Philistines' dungeon, David driven off his throne, and the list goes on. But because they didn't lose faith, God was able to use them in spite of their mistakes and gain even greater victories out of their seeming defeats. *"The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD… Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the LORD upholds him with His hand."* (Psalm 37:23-24)

And so it was, after this fiasco before the Jerusalem crowd and now the Sanhedrin, God promised Paul his heart's desire that he would *"bear witness at Rome"*. (19:21) It should be noted also that the Lord commended Paul because he *"testified for Me in Jerusalem".* Although Paul had gotten a bit off track, nevertheless, he was faithful to continue to testify to the Truth, and the Lord honored him for that.

> **Then, too, while we do need to walk carefully and earnestly that we miss not God's great will for us, yet let us not be anxious lest, because we are so human, so frail, so fallible, we may make some mistakes in the details and specifications of that plan. We will do well to remember this. God has a beautiful way of overruling mistakes when the heart is right with Him. That is the supreme essential. The one attitude of ours which can mar His purpose of love for our lives is the refusal to yield that life and will to His own great will of love for it. But when that life is honestly yielded, then the mistakes in the pathway which spring from our own human infirmities and fallibleness will be sweetly and blessedly corrected by God, as we move along that path. It is like guiding a ship. Our trembling hand upon the wheel may cause trifling wanderings from her course. But they seem greater to us than they are in reality.**

> **And if we but hold our craft steadily to the polestar of God's will as best we know it, she will reach her destined port with certainty, notwithstanding the swervings that have befallen her in the progress of her voyage. (“It's Just like the Plan” – from James McConkey's *Life Talks: A Series of Bible Talks on the Christian Life*)**

It seems the Lord did gain some great victories out of this seeming defeat, as we find out later – not unlike how the Lord did for Samson after he was blinded and thrown into the Philistine dungeon. Paul's capture served as the means by which he was able to go to Rome and continue teaching there, even in Caesar's household. Of course, he did lose his freedom for a few years, and after being released, his activities may have drawn more attention from the Roman system than was desirable.

Had Paul not gone to Jerusalem, his life would have followed a different course. But even though Paul did not follow that course (because of having ignored the leading of the Spirit), the Lord was not limited but was able to devise yet another plan. It was not as if the Lord was left lost and floundering (although Paul may have felt that way for awhile).

God can be a surprisingly flexible, changing, flowing Supervisor. And, most likely due to Paul's humbling and repentance, the Lord was able to reconstruct the road of his life. Whether the course of Paul's ministry turned out better or not as a result of his compromise at Jerusalem, would be difficult to judge or speculate on.

Of one thing we can be fairly sure: Paul probably returned to being more submitted to the leadings of the Holy Spirit – a humbler man, not so headstrong, and more willing to receive counsel from others. Everyone at some time in their life has had to learn certain lessons through the school of hard knocks, and Paul was no exception.

Perhaps the best way to look at this is to understand that God knew what Paul's weaknesses were, and in this case, He knew the best thing to do would be to let Paul go his own way for a bit. We can be sure the Devil had other plans (to bring an end to Paul), but the Lord and His angels outsmarted and foiled those plans at every turn.

God is so capable and economical and always gets a lot of mileage from the events, even mistakes, in our lives, especially when doing His will is the basic desire of our heart.

This episode in Paul's life served at least six purposes: one, to teach him where spiritual pride and unyieldedness can lead; two, to bring the Good News message one last time to the Jewish people and their rulers; three, to bring the same to the elite Roman rulers of the land; four, to drop him into the hands of the Romans and thereby give him the safe conduct and protection from the Jews he needed; and five, to enable him to continue his ministry in Rome (after being prepared for it by his experiences with the Roman rulers in Israel). And six, Paul's confinement (in Rome mainly) brought him the time and opportunity he needed to write most of the epistles – which turned out to be his most enduring legacy. His epistles have guided and inspired generations of Christ's followers ever since those days of the Early Church. We see then that the Lord is quite capable of weaving multiple purposes into whatever He does in our lives.

And through all of this, the Lord was able to teach him and us some valuable lessons. Paul was truly a valiant warrior in the Lord's cause. But the tendency in church history has been to over-glorify its heroes, glossing over their mistakes and thereby losing the valuable insights and lessons that can be learned.

> **Reading these book reviews of the famous saints and missionaries gave… me a feeling of inferiority complex that I'm never going to measure up to standards like that or that kind of survival of torture and persecution!**
>
> **God lets us have a few great saints to be examples and ideals, but… the saints and the great heroes of the Bible and all were so exalted and so high and so far superior, it just made you feel like, "Oh well, what's the use of trying? I could never be like that, I'll never make it!" – and you don't even feel like trying hardly because they're so far beyond and above you!**
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> **…They were unrelated to our present existence. They were out of this World, they were just in another World. But what I've tried to do in my writings – or I think the Lord's tried to do – is to show you how human they were and how much like us they were. I think**

it's more important to bring some of those characters down closer to your level where you can see there's some possible hopes for you. That's why King David was always such a great encouragement to me, a man who could sin and be as wicked as he was and yet the Lord forgave him and called him a man after His Own heart! I always figured, "Well, if he made it, I guess I can make it!"

[from lecture delivered after the *Jesus Revolution* era, 1981]

It's encouraging to people to see that you're not perfect, even their leaders are not perfect, they're human. Look at Moses! Look at King David! Look at Joseph! I mean there is just one long string of them in the Bible and even in church history. They were all men. – Men of faith, but all of them had feet of clay and all of them made mistakes and the Lord had to show that they were men and flesh and blood and just as weak as we are and made mistakes like we do, and it was all the Lord! And it had to be all the Lord, for they became shining examples – not of their own greatness but of their utter dependence on the Lord.

Just like salvation, it's *"not of yourselves, it is the gift of God!"* (Eph.2:8,9) *"Faith cometh by hearing the Word of God"* (Rom.10:17), but we're saved by grace through faith. And it's not of ourselves, lest any man should boast, it's the gift of God! And once in awhile He has to kind of rub our noses in it and humble our pride and show everybody how weak and fleshly we are.

That's the crux of the matter!… We're all sinners, we've all come short of the glory of God! (Rom.3:23) That isn't what God blames you for. He blames you for not calling on Him to help you and for not repenting, not letting Him change you, not letting Him do it. You can't do it yourself. You just have to turn your life, your mind, your heart and everything over to the Lord and let Him do it…

I'm sure the Lord knows what He's doing. I've had some things happen to me I couldn't understand, except I know they kept me humble and they worked out His plan. When you're really willing to resign yourself to the will of God, whatever it may be, whether you think it's good or bad, the Lord lets you go through some of those tests sometimes, even to let you think He's being a little too hard on you!…

Like dear old Dr. Mitchell used to say, "God does some things

to us to make us humble and sometimes He repeats them or does other things to us to see if we're still humble!" It's sort of God's intolerable compliment. One thing for sure, God knows what He's doing, so even if you don't understand it and you don't know what He's doing, He does, so you just have to wrap it up in a little bundle of faith and tuck it away till some day He reveals why.

He knows how to keep you in line, keep you in check so you don't get the big head and don't get too puffed up and too self-confident, have too great a sense of false security! The Lord really knows how to keep you in line, keep you in shape, toeing the mark so you won't miss the mark! So, praise the Lord!

The whole name of the game is faith and trust and to trust Him anyhow! *"Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him!"* – Even if you weren't a shining example and didn't have a glorious victory! – You trusted Him in seeming defeat, and that's a victory in itself, to be a good loser! – More than a conqueror!

Look at the martyrs! – *"These all died in faith!"* – That's the greatest thing that could be said of them! They died and they were killed and they were martyred! – But they never lost faith, they never lost heart. *"These all died in faith!"* (Heb.11:13)

That's the greatest victory of all, when you seem to be defeated and you still trust the Lord! That must be the greatest and the most pleasing thing of all to God. – Faith in the face of disaster, faith in the face of agony, faith in the face of death! – *"These all died in faith"!*

[from lecture delivered after the *Jesus Revolution* era, 1983]

V 12-13 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.

***"Bound themselves under an oath."* It's a little incomprehensible for us in a secular age to grasp what this ancient custom means of invoking divine judgment over one's activities. But the vow wasn't quite as rock-solid as one might think. If by chance they were unable to carry out their murderous plot, the would-be assassins did have a loophole; they could be released from the vow as long as one of the priests or rabbis was willing**

to officially absolve them from it.

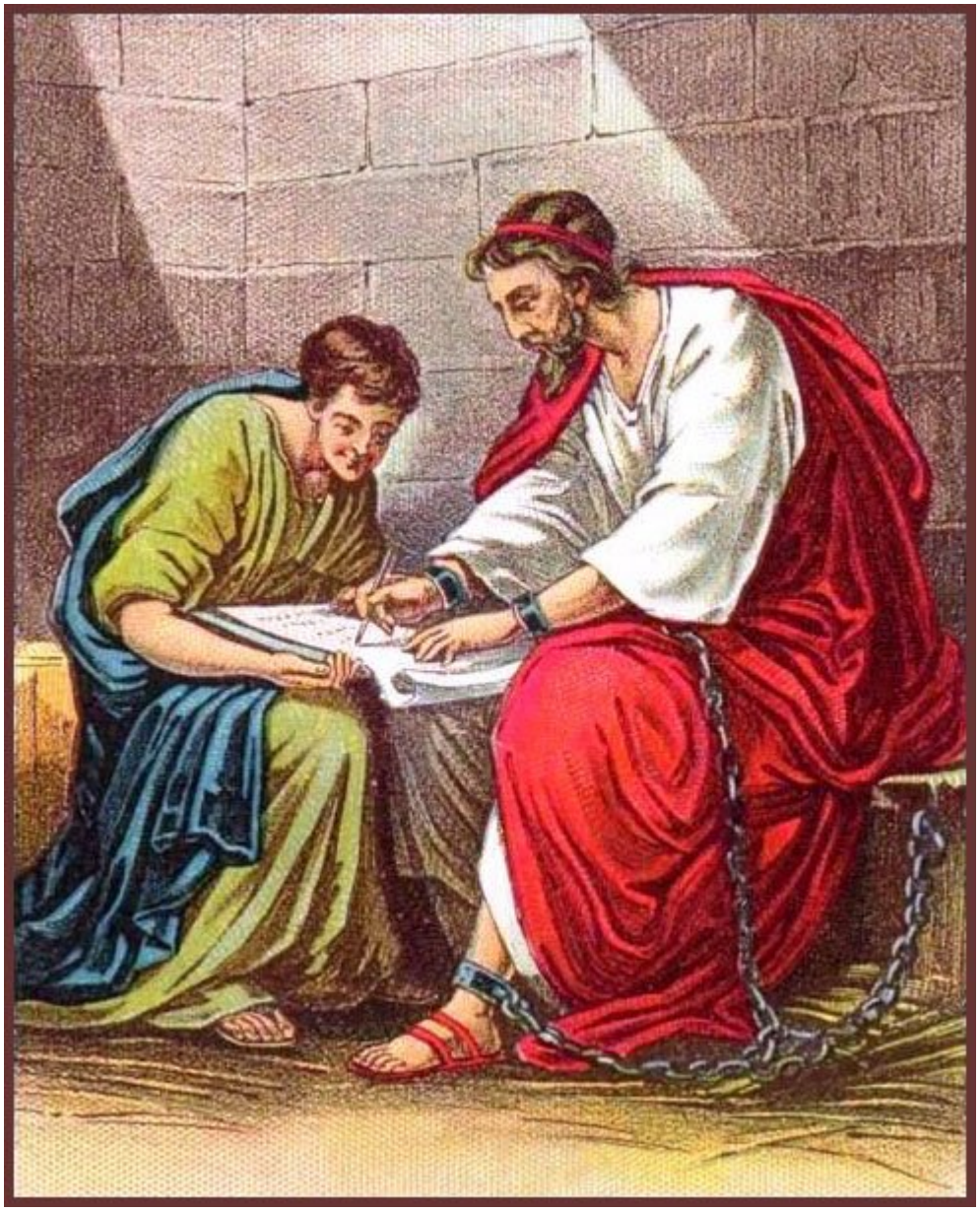
V 14-15 They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul.
"Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

***"Chief priests and elders."* This excluded the *"scribes",* mostly Pharisees, who were ready to defend Paul. The Sadducees were the main rulers of the Sanhedrin and had become the real bitter opponents of the new Christian movement. This was apparent all the way back in the very early days; when Peter and the apostles were at the peak of their popularity, they were opposed by *"the high priest… and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees)."* (Acts 5:17)**

These particular rulers *"were filled with indignation"* then, and they had not changed. And they were the ones now in league with this band of thugs who were *"ready to kill him* (Paul)*".* According to their plan, the rulers would find some pretext to draw Paul away from the protection of the main body of Roman soldiers, and the group of 40 Jewish assassins would do the rest of the dirty work.

V 16 So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.

***"Paul's sister's son."* Paul's nephew had somehow *"heard of their ambush"* and their dastardly plot to murder him, so he *"entered the barracks and told Paul"*. (Since Paul was not under arrest, but only under protective custody, he was able to receive visitors.)**



V 17-22 Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, “Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him.”

So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, “Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you.”

Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside and asked privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?”

And he said, “The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully

about him.

"But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you."

So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me."

Paul's nephew reveals the details of the Jews' plot to the commander and to beware of their plan to try to have another audience with Paul, for at that time would *"forty of them lie in wait for him".* The commander warns the *"young man… tell no man that you have revealed these things to me."* This could have been for the sake of the safety of Paul's nephew or for the purpose of keeping a step ahead of the Jews, or both.

V 23-24 And he called for two centurions, saying, "Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night;

"and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor."

***"Bring him safely to Felix the governor."* To avoid an explosive confrontation with the Jews and save Paul's life, the commander knew he would have to foil the conspirators' plot by sending Paul immediately to his superior in Caesarea, Governor Felix.**

It must have been a very serious situation. Lysias the commander sent almost half of his 1,000-man garrison to accompany Paul. The *"200 soldiers"* were elite legionnaires of the Roman army. These, along with *"70 horsemen"* and *"200 spearmen"*, made for quite a powerful contingent. When God wants to protect you, He certainly knows how to do it! *"Third hour of the night."* These forces were made ready about 9 p.m. By traveling at night, it would be easier to slip away from Paul's would-be assassins.

V 25-30 He wrote a letter in the following manner:

Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings.

This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a

Roman.
And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council.
I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains.
And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell.

"He wrote a letter." **The chief captain's letter to governor Felix briefly explains the cause and purpose of his sending Paul to him: *"I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but nothing charged against him deserving of death or of chains."* This evaluation was similar to that of several other Roman officials of the time: Pontius Pilate, Gallio, the Ephesian city clerk.**

"I… commanded his accusers to state before you." **Because of the plotting of the Jews in Jerusalem, it was unsafe to conduct a hearing there, and Lysias was obliged to burden Felix with the case. Caesarea, a well-fortified city built by the Romans as their center of administration in that part of the world, was a much safer place to conduct the hearing.**

V 31 **Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris.**

"Antipatris." **A Roman military outpost about 35 miles from Jerusalem. Travelers from Jerusalem to Caesarea often rested there. For the footsoldiers to march any more than that would have been too exhausting.**

V 32 **The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks.**

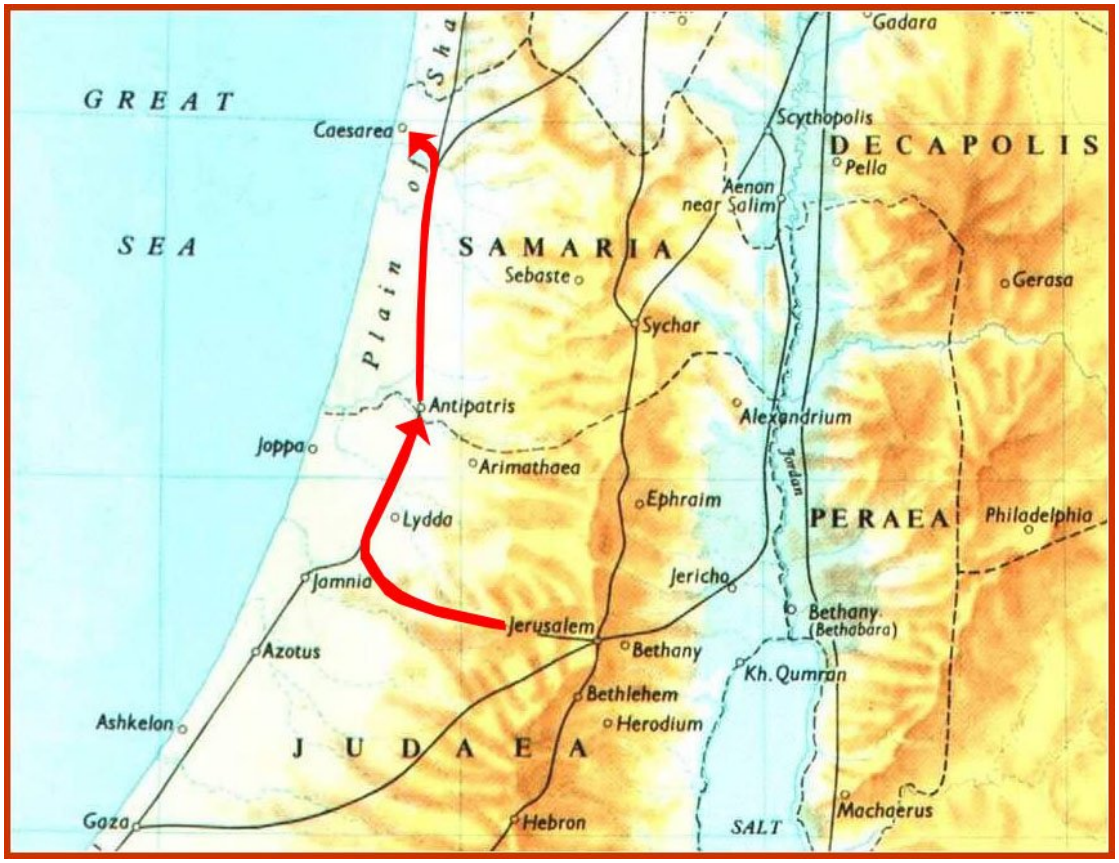
"Horsemen." **They were now in the more Gentile region of Samaria. With less danger of ambush, the footsoldiers were no longer needed.**

V 33-35 **When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him.**
And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was

**from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia,
he said, "I will hear you when your accusers also have come." And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.**

"Asked what province he was from." **Felix needed to know if he had jurisdiction to hear Paul's case.** ***"From Cilicia."*** **Judea and Cilicia were both under the jurisdiction of Syria at that time, so Felix could hear the case.**

"Herod's Praetorium." **Felix's official residence in Caesarea.**



(Continue to ACTS, chapter 24)