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## PAUL'S CONFRONTATION WITH THE HIGH PRIEST

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS  
NUMBER 113  
ACTS 23:1-5

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ACTS 23:1-5 "And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth. Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law? And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest? Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people."

In our recent studies we have been observing Jewish law and Roman law. These were the two great law systems of the ancient world. Although both of these law systems were great, the Jewish system had been infiltrated with religion and their original greatness had been distorted. Here they twist Jewish fairness and justice in an attempt to destroy Paul and the Roman system had to rise up and protect him from Jewish destruction. When religion infiltrated the Jewish law system, it fell apart. Religion is a great corruptor, both for people and institutions. Religion is man seeking to gain the approbation of God. Religion is the Devil's ace trump. Religion is responsible for a great deal of the evil in the world. Along with the old sin nature, religion is the No. 1 enemy of the human race. In the first eleven verses of this chapter we will see Paul before the Sanhedrin. Then in verses 11-15 we will see the assassination plot and Paul's deliverance from this plot. Paul was not only Satan's chief target at the beginning of the Church Age, along with Peter and the disciples, but at the same time he was the target of religion.

ACTS 23:1 "And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." Here we see that Paul has been delivered from the mob by the garrison commander and has been brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin for questioning. The garrison commander is at a disadvantage for he knows nothing of Paul's background. He knows nothing of Paul's mission tours and what he had accomplished in the Gentile world. But the garrison commander was a man of great common sense. He was an officer who could think. He had by the time of this questioning by the Sanhedrin come to realize that Paul was not just an ordinary man. He wanted to place Paul before the proper authorities. The Jewish Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish court in the land and the garrison commander concluded this was the way Paul's case should be handled.

The verb here translated "earnestly beholding" is from "atenizo" and means to have great courage and look someone straight in the eye. Paul started out to defend himself, but he discovered immediately that the Sanhedrin was saturated with prejudice toward him. The Sanhedrin of the Jews was comparable to our Supreme Court of today. The Sanhedrin had come into existence at the time of Antiochus the Great about 200 B.C. At one point Herod had assassinated all the members of the Sanhedrin, but others were elected to replace them and the organization went right on. They existed up until about 67 A.D. when the Romans slaughtered them. When Paul said, "Men and brethren" it simply meant that he was a Jew, addressing Jews. "I have lived" is from "Politeuo". From this word we get our words politics and politician. So the phrase "I have lived" really means "I have been a citizen of good conscience". So here Paul says nothing about his relationship to the Lord, or about his call from God to do this work. These facts will come out in testimony later on at Caesarea. Here before the Jewish Sanhedrin he used a different approach. Here he made his entire appeal on the basis of Roman citizenship. When Paul said, "I have been a citizen" it is in the perfect tense and means he had been a citizen for a long time.

The words "good conscience" refers to the fact that at no time had he violated the laws of the land. In essence the words "good conscience" is an idiom for the plea of "not guilty". By this phrase Paul was saying, "I am not guilty". This is what caused the high priest to be so upset. The high priest was a man named Ananias. He had been appointed by King Herod. Later on he will be deposed and will be assassinated in 67 A.D.

ACTS 23:2 "And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth." The word for "smite" means to slap or slug. It is in the perfect tense and it means "Keep on slugging him". Not only was this painful to Paul but it was illegal. Immediately Paul realized that he was not going to have a fair trial. Paul knew Jewish law well and he knew that Jewish law clearly specified that there was to be no violence in the courtroom. But here Paul was being slugged, contrary to Jewish law. Jewish law specified that one was to be tried without injury to himself. The one being tried could not be punished until the court had proven him guilty. In other words, Jewish law was based on the idea that a man was innocent until proven guilty. This is just the opposite from religion. Religion says that a man is guilty until proven innocent. Ananias, the high priest, knew these great principles of Jewish law. He knew quite well that Paul should never have been abused physically. But Ananias was so angry because of Paul's "not guilty" plea he told the guards to slug Paul.

ACTS 23:3 "Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?" This really means "Then said Paul face to face with the high priest". After the slugging Paul moved over in front of the high priest so he could look him straight in the eye. It is quite evident that the high priest was not wearing his priestly robe and Paul could not tell that he was the high priest. Paul said to him "God is about to smite thee". This is future tense and is prophetic. A little more than seven years from that date when Paul uttered these words, the Roman soldiers will attack Ananias on the streets of Jerusalem and will cut him to bits with their swords and will leave his body in a bloody heap on the street. Paul used the word "Mello" and this means "about to do something". Behind Paul's statement was the idea that God is higher than Jewish law and if Jewish law failed, then God would take over and take things in his own hands. "About to smite you" is a dramatic present and means that in a dramatic moment God will smite Ananias. In other words, Paul is telling the high priest that he will take his case to a higher court, even to the court of heaven where God is the judge. When Paul called the high priest "whited wall" he called him about as profane a name as in any language. This may not mean anything to us, but in that day it really meant something. "Koinao" is the word for whitewash Paul used here. So it refers to the idea that with religion they had whitewashed justice and had covered the filth of their injustice with a sham. He was calling the high priest a dirty, whitewashed slime of a character. This was the most severe language Paul ever used in his long career. Paul did not use the name of the Lord in vain, but he used very harsh words against the high priest. In those days they used the walls for their toilet facilities, then they would splash whitewash over the walls to cover up the stench. So when Paul called him a "whited wall" it was about as far as Paul could go.

Paul called him a phony, a whitewashed hypocrite. Now that's a good way to get killed even before you reach the door. When Paul learned that Ananias was the high priest, he completely reversed himself and used a different approach.

ACTS 23:4 "And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest?" This revelation was quite a shock to Paul. The word "revilest" is from "loidoreo" and it really means a strong expletive that carried with it as much insult as one can heap on another. So they really said, "Do you mean to throw insulting expletives at God's high priest?"

Notice they called Ananias "God's high priest". They had no right to place the name of God there. He was indeed the high priest but he was not God's high priest. Paul won't make an issue of that fact, but he could have. Paul knew that to be God's high priest you had to be from the Tribe of Levi and from the family of Aaron. Ananias was neither. Ananias had been politically appointed.

ACTS 23:5 "Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people." The words "I wist not", is an old English phrase and means "I do not know". Paul knew doctrine and he knew enough to be flexible. The system of Jewish law is being ignored, but please notice that Paul does not try to take the law into his own hands. Paul quoted from Exodus 22:28. Even though Ananias may be a man of prejudice and evil, he was the high priest and he represented an institution that had authority in the Jewish nation. Let us look at the facts concerning Paul's change of attitude as it is expressed in verse 5.

1. Paul reversed himself and applied doctrine to experience here. Paul knew the four divine institutions, and he knew the doctrine concerning divine institution No. 4, namely, the nation.
2. Immediately when Paul realized that Ananias was the high priest, he apologized for his harsh words and changed his approach.
3. In his action, Paul accepted the responsibility of civil obedience. This responsibility is set forth in Romans 13:1-7.
4. Paul recognized civil authority under divine institution No. 4, the nation, even though that authority was corrupt.
5. Paul recognized that two wrongs do not make a right.
6. God ordained under certain divine institutions systems of authority so the human race can survive. Satan would like to cut off the human race, either by absorbing it into the angelic race as he did in Genesis 6, or destroy it completely. But God, in the Devil's world (For that's what the world is now) has provided a system whereby the human race can be protected.

For us as believers there is the authority of God's Word, then there is the authority of the pastor, then there is a recognition of the authority of the four divine institutions, namely, volition--marriage--the family--and the nation. So here Paul recognized the authority of the Jewish nation, even though at that time it was corrupt.

7. Paul was opposed to civil disobedience and he never tried to overthrow constituted authority.
8. Paul recognized the fact that you do not build your happiness on the unhappiness of another.
9. Paul sited his authority from Scripture--Exodus 22:28. Civil disobedience is not the solution to man's problems. History will prove that Paul was right. Seven years from the time of this mob scene, the high priest would be cruelly assassinated in the streets of Jerusalem. Ananias lived by violence and he died by violence. "He that liveth by the sword shall perish by the sword" does not apply to the military. It applies to gangsters.

In our next study we will see the outcome of Paul's appeal.