

ACTS

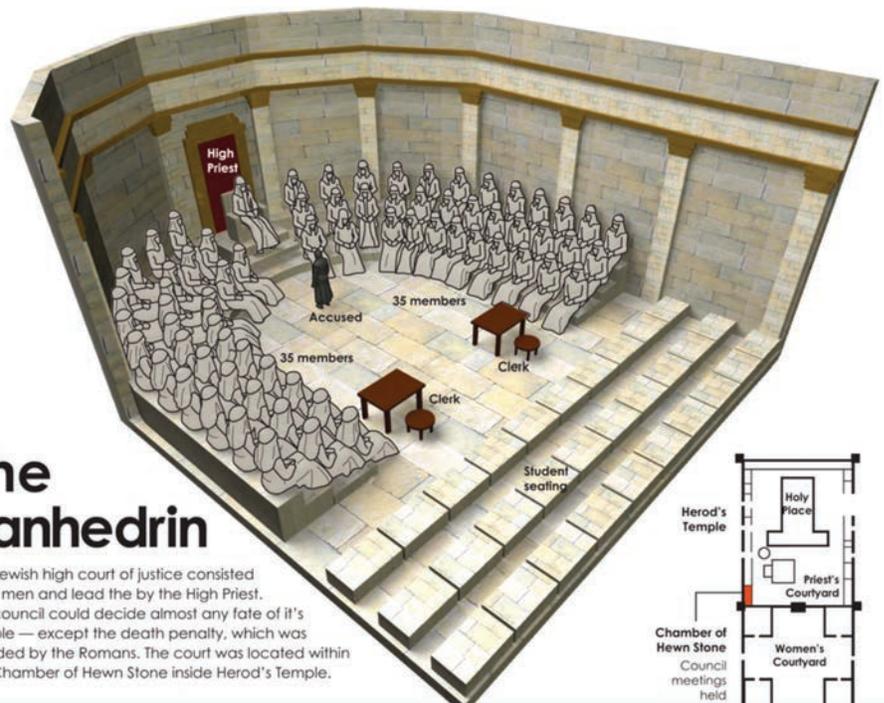
Chapter 23

Note from Kathy

That's not fair!!! Seriously, how many times have we said this or heard it? We all know there will be times when life feels unfair. But is fair what we really want? Is fair what we've been promised as a child of the King? The apostle Paul knew the Good Shepherd is so much better than fair. Why not take a few minutes to read Psalm 23 to remind you of our Good Shepherd's care and to refresh your soul?

Acts 23:1-5

Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." ²At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. ³When Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!" ⁴Those who were standing near Paul said, "How dare you insult God's high priest!" ⁵Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'"



The Sanhedrin

The Jewish high court of justice consisted of 71 men and led by the High Priest. The council could decide almost any fate of its people — except the death penalty, which was decided by the Romans. The court was located within the Chamber of Hewn Stone inside Herod's Temple.

Observation

1. Acts 23 opens with Paul standing before the Sanhedrin. He is a prisoner, yet he does not waste this divine opportunity to share the gospel. In verse 1, what fact does he share with them as his personal testimony?
2. You would think of all people that the high priest would be happy to hear this, but he was not. What did he order?
3. To keep someone from accidentally touching a grave the Jews would whitewash the entrances to their sepulchers. Paul said he did not realize the one who had given the order to strike him was the high priest. He called him a "whitewashed wall." What do you believe Paul meant by this statement?
4. Together the Pharisees and Sadducees were a tremendous force, but

Acts 23:11

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Acts 23:12-16

The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than forty men were involved in this plot. They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here." But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

Acts 23:27-35

"This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him. So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris. The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him. The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, he said, "I will hear your case when your accusers get here."

divided by conflict they would be much less of a threat. Paul brings up a topic that was always a heated debate between the Pharisees and Sadducees. Read verses 6-10. What was the subject?

- How was Paul comforted by God?
- The next morning some of the Jews conspired to kill Paul. According to verses 12-15, how many men were involved, and what was their plan?
- How was the conspiracy foiled?
- What did the commander do to protect his prisoner?



When were they to be ready to go?

- A letter was sent with the soldiers. Summarize the details of the letter.
From:
To:
Summary:
- It must have been difficult to get a large army out of the city undetected. When far enough away from Jerusalem the soldiers stopped. Where did they stop, and what happened there?
- After reading the letter from Claudius Lysias, what did Felix decide to do?
- What did he do with Paul?

Application

■ Matthew 5:38-39

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'
39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."*

■ Deuteronomy 31:8

The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.

■ Joshua 1:9

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.

■ Psalm 9:9

The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.

■ John 14:16-17

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

1. The apostle Paul had been a member of the Pharisees. The Pharisees adhered to the law with the utmost strictness. Acts 23 opened with Paul having a personal audience before the chief priests and the Sanhedrin. Many of these men had been his friends and probably his mentors just a few years earlier. Notice he called them, "my brothers." (Some translations say "friends" or "fellow Israelites.") Paul tried to appeal to their sense of rightness as he stated that his conscience was clear before God. And for that the high priest ordered him struck on the mouth. Have you ever felt the sting of friends turned enemies? How did you handle it?

We must not allow the jealousy, frustration or anger of others to lead us into temptation or sin. Jesus addressed issues like this in the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:38-39. How should believers handle these kinds of situations?

2. When appealing to their sense of rightness did not work, Paul tried something different. This is often referred to as divide and conquer. Jesus spoke to this very issue in Luke 11:17, "...any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall." Paul reminded these men not only that he was a Pharisee, but that he was on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead. This quickly created a heated argument between the Pharisees and Sadducees because of their vastly different beliefs regarding resurrection. What was the result of this situation, and why was this good for Paul?

3. That night the Lord appeared to Paul and gave him some very good news. What did the Lord tell Paul?

Has the Lord given you any promises that are of great comfort to you in times of distress?

Underline the promise from God in each of these verses in the sidebar: Deuteronomy 31:8, Joshua 1:9, Psalm 9:9 and John 14:16-17. Discuss in your group any other verses that comfort and strengthen you in times of trouble.

4. Once again in chapter 23 Paul's life was being threatened. Forty men were vowing to kill him or die trying. Not only did they state their intent, but they went to the priests and declared it as a solemn vow. How sad to see the priests who should be leading hearts away from evil and hatred, were actively plotting violent acts of hatred. Those in leadership are held to a greater responsibility since they have the power to influ-

■ Hebrews 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

■ Proverbs 16:12

It is an abomination for kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness.

■ Exodus 18:21

Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.

ence for good or evil. Read Hebrews 13:17, Proverbs 16:12 and Exodus 18:21. According to these verses, how does God instruct us to lead?

5. It is easy to talk about what a leader should do, and much harder to actually do it. In your personal leadership roles (parent, grandparent, supervisor, volunteer leader, etc.) what ways have you felt the Holy Spirit guiding you to make leadership adjustments?

Are you taking your position of leadership as seriously as your heavenly Father takes it?

Could you join the apostle Paul in his words in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

Are there any areas you feel you're being called to lead but haven't stepped up yet?

6. Our God is still on the throne, and He is in complete control. God's plans will not be thwarted, and no weapon formed against us will prosper. Paul's nephew overheard the plot to kill Paul, and told him about it. Paul sent him to the commander with the news, knowing the commander would handle it from there—handle it he did: 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spear-carrying men prepared to escort Paul to Caesarea. And all this was done before 9pm that evening. God is no respecter of persons. He was able to take care of the apostle Paul.

Do you believe God **can** take care of you?

Do you believe God **will** take care of you?

Briefly explain your above responses.

Paul had a big problem, but more importantly Paul had a big GOD! When was the last time you relied on your big God to work on your behalf?

7. Are you experiencing a big problem right now? Why not take a few minutes in prayer to hand it over to God and trust him fully to handle it? 1 Peter 5:7 says, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." What did you feel as you laid it as his feet?

Were you able to leave it there? Did you return hours, days, or a week later and take it back from the Lord?

8. Paul was taken to Caesarea and a letter was sent along for Gover-

nor Felix. This letter stated that there was a disturbance, but no real charges could be found that justified any ruling against Paul. The commander said he felt it was religious differences and not a matter that would warrant the death penalty, yet Paul is still in custody, facing an upcoming trial. Often times life is not fair—problems happen. Paul faced this trial with a heart of humility, obedience and trust in God. Like Paul, no matter what temporary trouble you face, you can rest knowing God will be with you. Think back on the last few problems or challenges you faced, big or small. How did you handle them, and how did you allow God to work on your behalf?

When you face injustice, how do you respond and where do you turn? Do you turn to God, people, food, shopping, alcohol, etc.?

What does where you turn say about your view of God and his role in your life? From reading God's word, what role do you believe God wants in your life?

How has studying this chapter helped you see God's omnipotence and omniscience—his total control and complete knowledge of all things and that he is working even if we cannot see his hand of mercy, care and protection?

9. Does knowing God will deal with the injustices of this world as our righteous judge help you face them when they come your way?

What do you know about God that enables you to rest in him and get back to the work he has called you to do in spite of your circumstances?

10. Why not take a few minutes to read Psalm 23 to be reminded of our Good Shepherd's care? Try personalizing the verses on the back of this page. Below is how I personalized Psalm 23.

God is the One who carefully and meticulously cares for me. Because he is watching over me, all my needs are met. When I am following His lead, I find places of refreshment and rest. When I question my next move and wonder which way to go, He leads me. Trials and troubles will come. There will be times when I feel the darkness closing in, and yet I need not be afraid because I am not alone. The LORD is with me. His correction and guidance are of great comfort to me. My enemies hold no power over me because he is greater than them all. His comfort and care are lavished on me. How could I ever sit and fret after experiencing his divine care not only in this life but for all eternity?

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,³ he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

