

Acts 23-26

Dr. Craig Keener

Session 22

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Sanhedrin, whitewashed wall, Ananias, Felix, Festus, Agrippa II, Bernice, appeal to Caesar, Claudius Lysias, Tertullus

Abstract

This lecture covers Acts chapters 23 through 26, analyzing Paul's hearings and defense speeches before various Jewish and Roman authorities. Dr. Craig Keener provides detailed historical and cultural context on the corrupt High Priest Ananias, the Roman governors Felix and Festus, and the Jewish royals Agrippa II and Bernice. He explains how Paul strategically navigated legal challenges and theological divides, ultimately utilizing his Roman citizenship to appeal to Caesar and secure a journey to Rome.

Outline

I. The Sanhedrin Hearing (Acts 22:30 - 23:10)

A. Context and Convening of the Council

1. Tribune Claudius Lysias convenes the Sanhedrin to obtain an official assessment of the charges against Paul.
2. Lysias expects a clear legal picture but is disappointed by immediate theological disputes.

B. The Character of High Priest Ananias (47 to 58/59 AD)

1. Historical record of corruption, abuse, and violence (documented by Josephus and Talmudic traditions).
2. Eventually assassinated by Jewish revolutionaries early in the war.

C. The Incident of the Blow and Paul's Response

1. Ananias orders Paul to be struck on the cheek, which was a severe, punishable insult and legal violation.
2. Paul responds: 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall' (alluding to Ezekiel 13:10-15 concealment of corruption).
3. Discussion on why Paul claimed he did not realize Ananias was high priest:
 - a. *Nearsightedness theory (Galatians 4:13) is rejected; 'plucking out eyes' was an ancient figure of speech for deep affection.*
 - b. *The high priest wore official regalia only for temple duties, not for chairing the Sanhedrin.*
 - c. *Paul likely used irony/sarcasm to reject Ananias's legitimacy as a righteous leader.*

4. Paul quotes Scripture (Exodus 22:28): 'Do not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'

D. Strategic Use of Rhetorical Ethos

1. Paul establishes his character (ethos) as a pious, law-abiding man of Scripture.
2. Identifies himself as 'a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees' on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead.
3. Pharisees in the council defend his revelation, suggesting an angel or spirit (possibly Jesus as a deceased spirit) spoke to him.
4. Sharp division between Pharisees and Sadducees erupts into a violent conflict; Lysias sends troops to rescue Paul.

II. The Assassination Plot and Paul's Escape (Acts 23:12-25)

A. The Conspirators and Their Oath

1. Over 40 young men bind themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they kill Paul.
2. Oaths could be legally released by a rabbi under certain circumstances, meaning they likely survived.
3. Youth in antiquity was highly associated with passion, aggression, and nationalistic/military zeal.

B. The Ambush Strategy

1. Conspirators seek high-priestly cooperation to request Paul be brought back to the Sanhedrin.
2. The route from Fortress Antonia to the chamber was only 1,000-1,500 feet, featuring a narrow path perfect for a swift, suicidal ambush.

C. The Leak and Intervention

1. Leaks from the Sanhedrin were common in the politically divided environment of Jerusalem.
2. Paul's nephew overhears the plot, visits the fortress (which permitted visitors, often for bribes), and warns Paul.
3. Paul is guarded by a centurion, a special privilege reserved for high-status prisoners and Roman citizens.
4. Nephew informs Claudius Lysias, who takes him by the hand and instructs him to keep the meeting confidential.
5. Lysias preempts the Sanhedrin's request, secretly planning Paul's immediate transfer to Caesarea.

III. The Midnight Transfer to Caesarea (Acts 23:23-35)

A. The Military Escort

1. Lysias dispatches a massive force: 480 infantry and 120 cavalry.
2. Heavy escort required due to rising night ambushes in Judea, exacerbated by Governor Felix's corrupt administration.

B. The Forced March

1. Roman troops execute a rapid, forced overnight march downhill to Antipatris (35-45 miles away).

2. At Antipatris, the infantry returns to Jerusalem, and the cavalry continues the safer daylight journey to Caesarea.

C. Lysias's Cover Letter to Governor Felix

1. Standard legal document that would enter the public file.
2. Shades the truth to paint Lysias in a heroic light, claiming he rescued Paul specifically because he was a Roman citizen.
3. Felix (Tiberius Claudius Felix) decides to handle the case because Cilicia was under his Syrian superior, avoiding adding to his boss's workload.

IV. The Trial Before Felix (Acts 24:1-27)

A. The Prosecution's Case

1. High Priest Ananias and elders enlist Tertullus, an eloquent Roman advocate.
2. Tertullus flatters Felix's 'governance' to paint Paul as a dangerous, seditious plague stirring up riots.

B. Paul's Forensic Defense

1. Exordium (v. 10): Spares empty flattery, respectfully noting Felix's long tenure as judge.
2. Narratio (v. 11): Clarifies he arrived only 12 days ago for Pentecost, establishing his piety.
3. Refutatio (v. 12-13): Denies inciting any crowds or speaking in synagogues, emphasizing they lack proof.
4. Confessio of Non-Crime (v. 14): Confesses he worships the God of Israel according to the 'Way.' Since Judaism is legal under Roman law, this cannot be prosecuted.
5. Ethos of Charity (v. 17): Mentions bringing alms and offerings (the collection) to his people, portraying himself as a benefactor.
6. Reverse Charges (v. 18-19): Points out the absence of the Asian Jews who initiated the riot. Under Roman law, their failure to appear should throw the case out.

C. Felix's Political Indecision

1. Felix recognizes Paul's innocence but refuses to release him to curry favor with the Jewish leaders.
2. Paul's citizen status and large following prevent Felix from simply executing him.
3. Felix and Drusilla (sister of Agrippa II, whom Felix seduced from her husband) summon Paul to listen to the gospel.
4. Paul's sermon on 'righteousness, self-control, and judgment' terrifies the corrupt, immorally married couple.
5. Felix holds Paul in comfortable custody for two years hoping for a bribe.
6. Recalled in 59 AD on corruption charges, Felix leaves Paul bound to appease the Jerusalem leadership.

V. The Trial Before Festus and the Appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:1-12)

A. Sucesion of Porcius Festus

1. Festus was a fair, efficient, and no-nonsense governor compared to his corrupt predecessors.

2. Quickly travels to Jerusalem to establish relations but refuses to transfer Paul there, avoiding the ambush plot.

B. The Appeal to Caesar

1. At the Caesarea trial, Jewish leaders fail to present any concrete proof.
2. Festus, wishing to humor the Jewish leaders, asks Paul if he is willing to go to Jerusalem for trial.
3. Paul exercises his ultimate citizen right to appeal to the Emperor (Provocatio).
4. Appeal before formal conviction was irregular but legally valid to escape a biased and dangerous local court.
5. Festus's council (concilium) approves, solving Festus's political dilemma by sending Paul to Rome.

VI. The Hearing Before Agrippa II and Bernice (Acts 25:13 - 26:32)

A. The Conundrum of the Cover Letter

1. Festus must draft a cover letter explaining the charges in a dossier sent to Rome, but lacks clear charges.
2. King Agrippa II and his sister Bernice arrive in Caesarea to greet the new governor.
3. Festus consults Agrippa, who has a Hellenistic education, Roman citizenship, and thorough knowledge of Judaism.

B. Paul's Elegant Defense Speech

1. Paul speaks in sophisticated Greek, tailoring his message specifically to Agrippa's scriptural expertise.
2. Recounts his Pharisaic upbringing, Damascus road experience, and commission.
3. Quotes Jesus' words using classic Greek idioms ('kicking against the pricks' from Euripides) to engage his royal audience.

C. The Interruption and Final Verdict

1. Festus interrupts, exclaiming that Paul's 'great learning has driven him insane' (reflecting ancient views of passionate prophets/philosophers).
2. Paul appeals directly to Agrippa's belief in the prophets: 'This matter was not done in a corner.'
3. Agrippa responds with safe irony: 'In such a short time, you're trying to make me a Christian.'
4. In private consultation, Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice agree Paul is innocent of any capital crime and could have been freed if he had not appealed to Caesar.