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The Conspiracy to Kill Paul
23: 12-22

59 AD

The conspiracy to kill Paul DIG: What dangers had Paul faced in the past? How do you explain the fierce determination of these men to kill Paul? Why do they think he is so dangerous? Why were the Pharisees left out of the plot? Why can we be reasonably sure that those forty men didn't starve to death? How would you feel if you were Paul when you heard the news from your nephew? What do we know about Paul's family? How does Luke speak of the Roman military in Acts? Why did the Jews hate Paul so much?

REFLECT: What examples of irrational hatred have you seen? What might be a way to break through that? When is it better just to get away from them? What risks did Paul's nephew take in this story? How might you be called upon this week to risk something by standing up for someone others dislike? How desperate is your need for courage right now? What are you facing that cannot be dealt with by anything less than God's gift of holy grit and determination? Have you experienced a transfer of God before? What could you testify about the Lord's faithfulness to supply His people strength when needed?

Paul's life had been in danger from the very beginning of **his** ministry, when **he** witnessed for **Messiah** in **Damascus (9:22-25)**. During **his** first visit to **Jerusalem**, after **his** conversion, **the** unbelieving **Hellenistic Jews** tried to **kill him (9:29)**. **Jewish leaders** in **Pisidian Antioch** drove **him** out of **the city (13:50-51),** and a mob of **Jews** and **Gentiles** in **Iconium** threatened to **stone him (14:5)**. However, the **stoning** that had been **plotted** in **Iconium** took place in **Lystra,** where **they dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead (14:19-20)**, and in **Corinth**, unbelieving **Jews** tried to get **him arrested (18:12-17)**. In **Ephesus**, **the** unbelieving **Jews** had **a plot** to **kill him (20:19)**, and **they** even planned to **kill him at sea (20:3)**. **The Jews** made false

accusations against **him** at the Temple in **Jerusalem,** and would have **killed him** there, but for the intervention of a **cohort** of **Roman soldiers**. **The Jews** had **plotted** against **Paul's Savior** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Ka – The Plot Against Jesus**), and **they** would do no less against **him**.

Paul's words take on special meaning when you consider all that **he** suffered at the hands of **his** own **countrymen, "For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the congregations of God in Messiah Yeshua that are in Judea – for you suffered the same things at the hands of your own countrymen as they did from the Judean leaders, who killed both the Lord Yeshua and the prophets and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God and hostile to all people, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they might be saved. As a result, they constantly fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last" (First Thessalonians 2:14-16).**

The plot formulated: The very next **day** after testifying before the **Jewish** supreme court (see **Cr – Paul's Defense Before the Great Sanhedrin**), unbelieving **Jews** from **Asia (21:27) formed a conspiracy (23:12a).** Some of **the Sadducees** agreed to cooperate with **them** and try to influence **Claudius Lysias, the commander** of **the Roman** guard. The Pharisees, with their greater openness to **Paul (23:9)**, are not mentioned. It was a natural thing for **the Sanhedrin** to want further information from **Paul**, and it would be an easy thing to arrange an **ambush** to **kill him**. Never-mind that human blood was not supposed to be spilled in the Temple Compound, **they** had ignored **their** own rules before (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Lh – The Laws of the Great Sanhedrin Regarding Trials**). **They** were that desperate again.

But all those **plotting** to take **Paul's** life had forgotten that **he** was **an apostle** of **Jesus Christ**, and that the exalted **Lord** was watching from heaven. When **Paul** was saved on **the Damascus Road (9:1-31)**, **Yeshua** had told **him** that **he** would suffer, but **God** had also promised that **He** would deliver **him** from **his** enemies **(9:15-16** and **26:16-17)**.[547] **The Lord's** assuring vision the night before **(23:11)** was timely, for **Paul's** troubles were far from over.

More than forty zealots bound themselves by an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than forty men would be needed because **Paul** would be guarded heavily by **Roman** soldiers. **The** leaders of the plot **went to the ruling cohanim and elders and** said: **We have bound ourselves with a great**

curse to neither eat nor drink until we have killed Paul (23:12b-14) The Greek word used to express **their oath** is particularly strong (Greek: *anathematizo* meaning *abomination*). **They** placed **themselves** under **a great curse**, probably in some form such as, "May I be eternally damned if . . ." But **they** didn't starve to death, for such an oath could be dissolved by the rabbis. **The Oral Law** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei – The Oral Law**) **provided for a release from an oath that was unfulfilled because of some unforeseen circumstance. The sages have allowed four kinds of vows to be nullified: vows of urging, vows of exaggeration, vows made in error and vows made under duress (Mishna N'darim 3.3).**[548] **Paul's** removal under heavy **Roman** guard would have qualified (see **Cu – Paul Escorted to Caesarea**).



So this time **you and the Sanhedrin serve notice to the commander to bring him down to** the Royal Stoa once again **– like you are about to investigate his case more thoroughly. But we are ready to kill him before he comes near (23:12-15). The conspirators** wanted to lure **Paul** to **their** own Hall of Judgment on the extreme opposite corner of the Temple Compound. The Court of the Gentiles between Fort Antonia and the Royal Stoa was a three-acre platform with walls stretching a quarter mile and could have held two amphitheaters the size of the Roman Coliseum, or a total of about 200,000 people. This would have exposed **Paul** and **the** few **Roman** troops accompanying **him** to attack. **The zealots** could easily spring out from the mouth of the Double Gate Passage as **the Roman** guard approached the Royal Stoa, overwhelm them, assassinate **Paul**, and then flee south through the underground tunnel leading into **the Lower City**.


That **the assassins** assumed **the Sanhedrin's** leadership would take part in **the** murder **plot** says much about the apparent corruption of **Isra'el's highest court**. Nor did **the Sanhedrin** disappoint **them (23:20).**

The plot discovered: But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush (23:16a). We know a little bit about **Sha'ul's** parents. **His** father was a Pharisee who lived in Tarsus, Cilicia. **His** family were Hellenistic **Jews** who from the tribe of Benjamin who spoke both Hebrew and Greek. But we know nothing about **his sister** or about **his nephew**, who was visiting or living in **Yerushalayim** and who helped save **him**. How this **nephew** became aware of **the plot** is uncertain. Either **Paul's** enemies included members of **his** own family, in which case **the nephew's** presence would not have alarmed them; or **his** relationship to **Paul** was unknown to **the plotters**.[549]

Paul's nephew went into the headquarters at Fort Antonia **and told him (23:16).** This is the only specific reference in Scripture to **Paul's** family (except for the possible references in **Romans 16:7, 11** and **21**). It raises many questions that cannot be answered with certainty. What was **Paul's nephew** doing in **Jerusalem**, since the family home was in Tarsus? Was **he** following in **his uncle's** footsteps and studying to be a rabbi? Since **Paul's** family had apparently disinherited **him** when **he** became a believer **(Philippians 3:8)**, why did **he** care what happened to **his uncle**? Had **Paul's sister** or **nephew** become believers? This one line of Scripture brings up more questions than it answers.[550]

His accessibility to **Paul** was not unusual. **He** had not been charged with a crime,

so **he** was merely in protective custody. Prisoners of high rank, such as **Paul** with **his Roman** citizenship, were often given a great deal of liberty for visits from family and friends. In fact, **Paul's** considerable standing with **the Romans** can be seen by the ease with which **he called one of the centurions and** said: **Take this young man to the commander, for he has a message for him."**[551] **Paul** didn't even tell **the centurion** about **the plot**! Nevertheless, **the centurion took him and led him to the commander and said, "The prisoner Paul called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you" (23:17-18).**

The commander sensed that it was a matter of extreme importance and **took him by the hand, stepped aside, and began asking him privately.** We get the impression that **the lad** was quite young, and the commander's actions were quite appropriate. **He** asked: **What is it that you have to report to me. And Paul's nephew** gave **the report** in detail, saying: **The Judean leaders have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the Sanhedrin** in the Royal Stoa **tomorrow – as if they are about to investigate more thoroughly about him. But do not give in to them, for more than forty of them have bound themselves by a curse not to eat or drink until they have killed him. Even now, they are ready and waiting for your consent (23:19-21).** Thus, in **God's** providence, **Lysias** learned of **the plot** even before **the Jews** approached **him**.

So the commander dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me about these things" (23:22). It seems that **Lysias** made up **his** mind as to what **he** should do while **the boy** was speaking. **He** may well have already decided that **his** proper course of action was to refer the case of **Paul** to **his** superior officer, since **he himself** did not have the necessary authority to deal with it. **The boy's** news had simply sped up **his** action of sending **Paul** to Caesarea, and made it clear that **he** must authorize maximum security measures to do it.[552] It would be ten more years before **Paul** was executed by **Roman** hands (see **Dg – Paul's Fourth Missionary Journey**).

It was a matter of supreme importance that the matter be kept strictly secret. No one was to know that **Lysias** was aware of **the plot**. One has to admire the integrity and courage of **Claudius**. How did **he** know **the boy** was even telling the truth? **Paul** had already caused **Lysias** so much trouble that it might have been a relief to get rid of **him**. But **he** had a **Roman** citizen to protect, and **he** was going to do **his** duty. Throughout the book of **Acts, Luke** speaks favorably of **the Roman** military officers, beginning with **Cornelius** in **Acts 10** and ending with **Julius** in

Acts 27:1, 3 and **43**. There is no record in **Acts** of official **Roman** persecution against the Church; the opposition was always instigated by unbelieving **Jews**. While **the Roman** Empire had its share of corrupt political opportunists, for the most part, the military leaders were men of quality who respected **Roman** law.[553]

This passage is rooted in **God's** providence, which moves to protect **God's** children, although the means are not always known. **The Lord** works behind-the-scenes here. **Stephen's** martyrdom (see **Ax – The Stoning of Stephen**) shows that providence also does not always mean physical rescue as it does here with **Paul**. **Paul** was assured that **he** would reach **Rome (23:11)**. It is ironic that **Roman** justice would bring **him** there as a prisoner so that will **he** would arrive safely and immediately be speaking to the highest levels of **Roman** society. It is unlikely that if **Paul** had journeyed as part of a missionary outreach to **Rome** on **his** own, such a high-level audience would have been possible. It is one of the mysteries of **YHVH** and **His** providence that many times we cannot see why things are happening as they are. Yet **God** is surely at work in ways we could not have planned on our own.[554]

Lord**, sometimes I must confess with **David** that **evils beyond number surround me, my sins have overtaken me – I cannot see – they are more than the hairs of my head – and my heart fails me. ADONAI, please deliver me! ADONAI, come quickly to help me! Let all those who seek You rejoice and be glad in You. Let those who love your salvation continually say, "ADONAI be magnified!" But I – I am poor and needy – yet my Lord is mindful of me. You are my help and my deliverer – O my God, do not delay (Psalm 40:12-13, 16-17).[555]