

*<sup>12</sup> The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. <sup>13</sup> More than forty men were involved in this plot. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. <sup>17</sup> Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." <sup>18</sup> So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you." <sup>19</sup> The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?" <sup>20</sup> He said: "Some Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. <sup>21</sup> Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request." <sup>22</sup> The commander dismissed the young man with this warning: "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me."*

Last week we saw that after the Sanhedrin started arguing among themselves and it all got rather heated, the Roman tribune had Paul brought back into the barracks after discovering that the Jews were unable to give any reason why they wanted to kill Paul. Their religious arguments over whether angels existed and whether the dead would rise again were all beside the point so far as the Romans were concerned and the examination of Paul that was expected from them simply didn't happen because they were divided on theological issues which the Romans would think absurd. The Roman commander or tribune had sought to justify himself arresting a Roman citizen and had got nowhere.

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The next morning 40 men decided to take an oath... no light thing in the eyes of a Sadducee or Pharisee.. to kill Paul. The Jewish law on oaths is found in Numbers 30:1-2 *Moses said to the heads of the tribes of Israel: "This is what the LORD commands: <sup>2</sup> When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.* So this is very serious. However, the Jewish law also says in Exodus 20: 13 *You shall not murder".*

King Saul uttered an oath which bound the people – 1 Samuel 14:24-46. He said, "Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies." Little did he know that his own son hadn't heard this and ate some honey, and therefore deserved death – but was saved by the soldiers who refused to enact the punishment for breaking an oath made by the king after Jonathan and his men were victorious in battle that day. The passage shows the foolishness of Saul making an oath without seeking God first. In another passage – 2 Samuel 3:35 King David took an oath not to eat before sunset after hearing Joab had killed Abner, son of Ner (Ner was King Saul's uncle, Abner was his cousin).

These 40 men obviously were all worked up to even consider such a rash oath which would have meant invading the barracks and attacking Roman soldiers, with all the consequences that involved. Finding men ready to die for a cause is unsurprising when we read how many Jews died in regular revolts while under Roman occupation. Trying to murder a fellow Jew outside of the barracks needed some kind of strategy involving the Sanhedrin and the elders.

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This obviously puts the chief priests and elders in an awkward position, but as we already know Ananias, the chief priest was a bad chief priest. He had been sent to Rome by the governor of Syria (which included Israel) for trial for supporting revolts but was acquitted by Claudius in 52AD. Later in 58AD as the Jews were revolting again, the people killed him for being a Roman stooge. Reading between the lines we can see he had good relations with some Romans, and so asking for another opportunity to question Paul might seem reasonable. He obviously had no

objection to these 40 men seeking to assassinate Paul and was probably pretty upset that Paul had managed to turn the tables on the Sanhedrin to get them to fight amongst themselves and lose sight of their main objective – to kill Paul. Last week it was unclear where Paul was brought, but probably the meeting place of the Council adjacent to the north wall of the Temple. Using the phrase “bring him out” indicates removal from the fort of Antonius also next to the north wall of the Temple. However, the Roman tribune was a more levelheaded man than they expected him to be. Ordinarily Romans really couldn’t care less what the Jews got up among themselves so long as there was no disorder, but Paul was a Roman citizen and as such entitled to the full protection of Rome against foreigners.

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We hear now that Paul has a sister with no name and a nephew with no name who live in Jerusalem. Remember that Saul was sent from Jerusalem by the Sanhedrin to find Christians. While Paul always says he’s from Tarsus, he was living in Jerusalem some 12 or 15 years earlier, and now has a sister living there. Luke gives us snippets of family history and mentions characters that sometimes reappear in Paul’s letters, but his sister is mentioned just once. He has other relatives or kinsmen – there are five mentioned in Romans 16:7 (Andronicus), 11 (Herodion) and 21 (Lucius, Jason and Sospater) and one female relative (verse 7 Junia).

Paul’s sister was able to find out about this oath taking bunch of hot heads and their plans. She must have had friends or relatives who moved in the right circles. She sends her son, Paul’s nephew to the barracks and he manages to speak to Paul first. A prison visit from a relative would be allowed to bring money, food and clothing. However, Paul calls an officer, one of the centurions to ask him to take his nephew to the tribune. Normally a fort would have a cohort – 480 legionnaires, 6 centurions and other junior officers, slaves, support staff, and be commanded by a military tribune. There were usually ten cohorts in a legion, commanded by a legate. It seems that Paul’s request, as a Roman citizen, albeit a prisoner, was easily granted and the tribune took Paul’s nephew by the hand to get information out of him.

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Having got intelligence, the Tribune warns Paul’s nephew to keep quiet. This will wrong foot the oath takers and the Sanhedrin. We’ll see next week what the tribune does, as he takes the threat seriously and wants to be rid of Paul and pass him up the chain of command. What Luke tells us is that the Romans acted using reason and logic, while the Jewish leaders acted emotionally, unreasonably, illogically, hatefully and twisting the law of Moses to suit their own purposes. Sounds a familiar line of action used widely by those in power in the world today!

### **If this story happened today, what would it look like?**

We’ve just seen some Islamic extremists launch attacks on Israel. They decided that their religion as well as their social conditions and history justified killing people of another faith – even though the Jews and Christians are called in the Quran “people of the book” who are to be tolerated (and be subject to additional taxes) rather than be exterminated refusing to accept Islam. Their actions will have theological support somewhere in the Quran and in the Hadiths, the sayings of Muhammed which were written a hundred years after his death. Excuses and justification for murders are found in all societies by those seeking revenge, return of property, power over others, and punishment. Reason and logic play little part in such actions. Emotion, hatred, greed, envy and unreason drive the people who seek to murder others, as well as those who support their actions by demonstrating on the streets and filling the media with their opinions.

### **What is this story saying to us today?**

The account of the actions of the Jews and the Romans tells us that nothing has changed in human nature. The Jews were under occupation, but by a power that protected its own, collected taxes and imposed peace with

overwhelming force. Within that state, the Jews had considerable autonomy, and were ruled by puppet kings and the priesthood, who also were not much interested in people other than to extract taxes and have power over them. The Sanhedrin and the zealous Jews were self-righteous hypocrites. Today we are surrounded by self-righteous hypocrites who dominate the media, the governing and educational sectors by seeking to suppress criticism and impose their phoney values on others. Much of their ideology is based on emotion, unreason and hatred of all who expose their hypocrisy and falsehoods. They proclaim that they are good people and therefore all who disagree with them must be bad people. They really think that they are well meaning without thinking logically about issues. None want to accept responsibility for the consequences of their ideology. So long as they are not personally affected, they are passing the mess they have created on to the next generation infected with wrong ideas based on emotion instead of facts. What God says is truth. is denied and mocked by these deceivers blinded by their self-righteousness into believing they have their truths which must be true even though factual evidence clearly indicates they are wrong. Tell a lie often enough and people will believe it.

### **Could the story make a difference to my life, and if so, how?**

Standing up for Jesus and not following the world's imposition of values based on lies, envy and unreason is becoming harder as Christian voices are increasingly drowned out of all walks of life. Those Christian voices who still can be heard are often speaking on issues that do not point to Jesus but rather to agreeing with the world's view on issues which will not invite condemnation from those who reject God's views. Being well meaning in seeking not to offend others who are proclaiming lies as truth has consequences. Choosing the narrow path is harder than going with the flow and is driving Christians into closed sections of society so that they cannot be infected by society's antipathy towards them. Christians are called to be light in the world, to go out and disciple the nations and not to flinch from the truth which condemns the world's hedonism.

1 Peter 4 12-19

*<sup>12</sup> Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. <sup>15</sup> If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. <sup>16</sup> However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. <sup>17</sup> For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? <sup>18</sup> And*

*'If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,  
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'*

*<sup>19</sup> So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*

Jude 17-23

*<sup>17</sup> But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. <sup>18</sup> They said to you, 'In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.' <sup>19</sup> These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.*

*<sup>20</sup> But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, <sup>21</sup> keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.*

*<sup>22</sup> Be merciful to those who doubt; <sup>23</sup> save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.*