

Acts 23 – Paul ministers in chains Rome protects Paul

THEME: Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin.

Paul is now a prisoner, and we will follow his life as a prisoner. From this point on we find Paul giving a defense of himself and his ministry. He will appear before several rulers. Because the Jews are plotting his death, he will be taken down to Caesarea. He will spend about two years there in prison before he finally appeals and is sent to Rome.

You recall we have mentioned that there has always been some controversy, some difference of opinion, as to whether or not Paul should have gone to Jerusalem. Was he in the will of God when he did this? I contend that he was entirely in the will of God. I think that as we move on we will find again and again that Paul is in the will of God. It is true that he has been arrested, and it is true that he is having a rough time, but that does not mean that he is not in God's will.

As we go along we can see the hand of God in the life of this man. The same One who moved in the life of Paul wants to move in your life and in my life today. That is the glory and wonder of it all, friend. Right down here where you and I walk in a commonplace way, God is moving in our lives. In one way we are living a very humble existence and many of us today have a very simple, routine life. Yet God is concerned and interested in us. God wants to give us that leading and guiding that you and I need for today in the complexity that faces us in our contemporary culture. Believe me, we need that help today. There is no question that we need God on the scene.

A great many people go to extremes today. They are trying to have some great emotional or revolutionary experience such as Paul had. I don't think that we need to do that. As a matter of fact, I doubt that you or I will have some great experience. It is by simple faith that one comes to Christ. We are to trust Him and to walk with Him. He will give the leading, the guidance, and direction in our everyday lives.

We have seen how the Roman captain arrested Paul and put him in prison and was going to beat him. He refrained from doing that when he learned that Paul was a Roman citizen. He was amazed to find that Paul was a Jew who could speak Greek and was a Roman citizen. Paul was a highly educated, cosmopolitan gentleman.

Now the Sanhedrin, composed of the religious rulers, wants to try him. Paul makes a futile attempt here to explain his position and his conduct to the Sanhedrin. The Lord encourages Paul. Then we see that the plot to murder Paul leads to his transfer to Caesarea for trial before Felix. This is a remarkable section and a very thrilling account of the experiences of Paul as a prisoner for Jesus Christ. - McGee

Act 23:1-2 Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

Standing before the Sanhedrin, Paul prefaced his remarks with a statement that throughout his life he had lived in all good conscience. The high priest, Ananias, was infuriated by this statement. He doubtless looked on Paul as an apostate from the Jewish religion, a renegade, a turncoat. How could one who had turned from Judaism to Christianity claim such innocence? Accordingly, the high priest ordered that the prisoner be slapped on the mouth. This order was extremely unjust, since the case had hardly gotten underway. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Acts 23 – Paul ministers in chains Rome protects Paul

1. We think of the preciousness of a good man. We have had here the usual variety of men—a pretentious hypocrite, his furious associates, an average heathen captain, his stupid soldiery, and besides these one man who “lived in all good conscience before God.” It is easy to see who is Master, and He rules our hearts today.
2. Yet the good man is among enemies. He did not imagine that to be on the right side is to be on the easy side.
3. But the good man among enemies has God’s care and love. (H. A. Edson, D. D.) - Biblical Illustrator

Are we any different? When we uphold righteousness and live in good conscience, should we expect an easy ride here in enemy territory?

Act 23:3 Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?"

Under Roman law no man was to be punished until judgment had been handed in. Just because a man is arrested and accused of a certain crime does not grant liberty to those who had arrested him to abuse him. In that day the Roman law actually granted a great deal of justice. However, this incident and the trial of Jesus make us recognize that even the Roman law could be twisted and turned. Justice is dependent upon the one who is executing the law.

In our day there are a great many people who feel that if we change our form of government, or at least if we change our party from the one that is in power—whichever it may be—this will give us a solution to all our problems. It has never solved our problems in the past. The men who began our system of government had a great consciousness of God. Although a man like Thomas Jefferson was a deist and could not be called a born-again believer, he had a conviction that the Bible was the Word of God and he respected it. We don't find that in our leadership today, and yet we wonder why the system won't work. We think we need to change the system. Do you know what we need? We need to change men's hearts. It is man that needs changing, not the system.

The high priest orders Paul smitten on the mouth, and Paul speaks out against him very strongly. This should dispel the idea that Paul was some sort of partywaist. The concept that humility makes a person a sort of Mr. Milquetoast is all wrong. Actually, humility and meekness mean that you submit yourself to the will of God, regardless of the cost. Paul is a meek man and a humble man, but he is not about to take injustice lying down. He calls this man a whitewashed wall. “While you are judging me according to the Mosaic Law, you are breaking the Law yourself.” That reveals that Paul also knew the Law. A man cannot be condemned or punished before judgment has been handed down. - McGee

Meekness is not weakness. Silence in the face of injustice is consenting to evil. Do you think our country, or our culture would be where it is today if all Christians since our founding in 1776 had been as strong and courageous as Paul?

Act 23:4-5 And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.'"

Acts 23 – Paul ministers in chains Rome protects Paul

The attendants were shocked by the apostle's scathing rebuke. Did he not know that he was speaking to the high priest?

For some reason unknown to us, Paul had not actually realized that Ananias was the high priest. The Sanhedrin had been assembled on short notice, and perhaps Ananias was not wearing his official robes. It may even be that he was not occupying the seat customarily assigned to the high priest. Or perhaps Paul's weak eyesight was the cause. Whatever the reason, Paul had not intentionally spoken evil of the duly constituted ruler. He quickly apologized for his words, quoting Exo_22:28 : "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people." – Believers Bible Commentary

Paul spoke these words on the day when Nero was the King. How about us do we pray for our leaders to turn or for Heaven's rule in our government or do we simply complain and murmur?

Act 23:6 But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"

We are getting more of Paul's background. His father had also been a Pharisee, probably a wealthy and influential man.

Paul uses the discord between two parties to further his own defense. The issue here is not the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is simply that the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead and had this hope, while the Sadducees did not. So, Paul turns the trial into a theological argument between the "fundamentalists" and the "liberals." That is easy to do. There never has been a time when you couldn't get these two groups at each other's throats! That is what Paul is doing here. - McGee

Act 23:7-9 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God."

Whether or not he was justified, his words did provoke a dissension ... between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and caused a loud outcry. Some of the scribes of the Pharisees defended Paul's innocence, and said in effect, "What does it matter anyway, if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" – Believers' Bible Commentary

Note: This is like the Art of War. He likely knows maybe by the Holy Spirit or by common sense that their hearts are hardened to the Gospel. They already condemned Jesus, so he strategically exposes the tensions between his accusers and moves the focus of the persecution to their camp.

Matthew 10:16 (Amplified) "Listen carefully: I am sending you out like sheep among wolves; so be wise as serpents, and innocent as doves [have no self-serving agenda]."

Act 23:10 Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.

Acts 23 – Paul ministers in chains Rome protects Paul

This is the first time that Dr. Luke says there was “a great dissension.” Knowing how he uses understatement, I am of the opinion that this is the worst dissension recorded in the Book of Acts concerning any group. Paul's life is so in danger again that the Roman captain reaches in and saves him from the angry Sanhedrin. While I have defended Gallio's concept of the separation of church and state, the state is protecting the apostle Paul at this point, which is quite proper. So the chief captain rescues Paul again without learning the real nature of the hatred against Paul. – McGee

Act 23:11 But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome."

The following night the Lord Jesus made a personal appearance to Paul in the prison, and said, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.” It is remarkable that in a passage where the apostle's actions have been subject to considerable criticism, the Lord should personally praise him for having borne faithful witness in Jerusalem. There was not a word of criticism or reproach from the Savior. Rather, it was a message of sheer praise and promise. Paul's service was not over yet. As he had been faithful in his ministry in Jerusalem, so he would also bear witness for Christ at Rome. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Note: Just because things don't appear to be going smoothly in our eyes, does not mean that the Lord is not exceedingly pleased with you. In fact, if there is too much smooth going in the evil world, the opposite is likely true.

A Plot to Kill Paul

Act 23:12-15 And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul. Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

The next day, some of the Jews banded together to kill the Apostle Paul. In fact, more than forty of them bound themselves under an oath that they would eat nothing until they had killed “this imposter.” Their scheme was as follows: they went to the chief priests and elders, suggesting that a meeting of the Sanhedrin be announced in order to hear Paul's case more thoroughly. The Sanhedrin would ask the commander to bring the prisoner to them. But the forty assassins would lie in ambush somewhere between the prison and the council hall. When Paul came near them, they would pounce on him and kill him. – Believers' Bible Commentary

A Fight to the Finish (Ephesians 6-10-12 The Message Bible)

10-12 And that about wraps it up. God is strong, and he wants you strong. So, take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no weekend

Acts 23 – Paul ministers in chains Rome protects Paul

war that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

Act 23:16-19 *So, when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him." So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you." Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside, and asked privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?"*

In the providence of God, a nephew of the apostle overheard the plot and reported it to Paul. The latter believed in availing himself of legitimate means to insure his safety; therefore, he reported the matter to one of the centurions. The centurion personally escorted the young man to the commander. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Note: God is always there, but we have to sound the trumpet in times of need and praise.

Numbers 10:9-10 *When you go into battle in your own land against an enemy who is oppressing you, sound a blast on the trumpets. Then you will be remembered by the LORD your God and rescued from your enemies. Also, at your times of rejoicing—your appointed festivals and New Moon feasts—you are to sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, and they will be a memorial for you before your God. I am the LORD your God."*

Act 23:20-22 *And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you." So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me."*

In this way the captain is alerted to the plot against Paul.

Let's stop to note something here. I find today that there is a group of super-pious folk, very sincere and very well-meaning, which tells me I should not go to a doctor concerning my cancer or other illnesses but that I should trust the Lord to heal me. Well, I certainly do trust the Lord; I have turned my case over to the Great Physician, and I believe He provides doctors. It would have been a simple thing for Paul to have told his nephew, "Thanks for telling me the news, but I'm trusting the Lord—so you can go back home." But we find here that Paul used the privileges of his Roman citizenship which were available to him. Obviously, the Lord provides these means and He expects us to use them. This in no way means that we are not trusting Him. Rather, we are trusting God to use the methods and the means to accomplish His purpose. - McGee

Paul Sent to Felix the Governor

Act 23:23-24 *And he called for two centurions, saying, "Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night; and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor."*

Acts 23 – Paul ministers in chains Rome protects Paul

The commander quickly called for two centurions and arranged for a military escort to take the apostle to Caesarea. The guard was made up of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen. The trip was to be made under cover of darkness—at nine o'clock at night.

The great size of the military escort was not intended to be a tribute to this faithful messenger of Christ. Rather, it was an expression of the determination of the commander to maintain his reputation with his Roman superiors; if the Jews succeeded in killing Paul, a Roman citizen, then the officer in charge would be required to answer for his laxness. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Notice: God uses the pride of the commander and his desire for a good reputation with the Governor to provide Paul a honor guard escort on the trip. The Lord can use all players on the field to accomplish His Will and purposes. Therefore, there is no place for fear if you are firmly in the center of God's Will.

Act 23:25-27 He wrote a letter in the following manner: Claudius Lysias, To the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman.

The commander identifies himself as Claudius Lysias in the letter which he wrote to the Roman governor Felix. The purpose of the letter was, of course, to explain the situation with regard to Paul. It is rather amusing to see how Lysias sought to portray himself as a hero and a defender of public righteousness. He probably was extremely fearful lest it be reported to Felix that he had tied up an uncondemned Roman citizen. Fortunately for Claudius Lysias, Paul did not tattle. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Act 23:28-29 And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains.

It is clear that Claudius Lysias never did know exactly what the charge was against Paul. He knew it pertained to their law. Under Roman law Paul was not guilty of anything worthy of death or of imprisonment. - McGee

Act 23:30-35 And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell. Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks. When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia, he said, "I will hear you when your accusers also have come." And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.

The trip to Caesarea was broken briefly at Antipatris, a city about thirty-nine miles from Jerusalem and twenty-four miles from Caesarea. Since there was little or no more danger of ambush from the Jews from this point on, the soldiers returned to Jerusalem, leaving the horsemen to escort Paul to Caesarea. Upon arrival, they delivered Paul to Felix, together with the letter from Lysias. When preliminary inquiry satisfied Felix as to the apostle's Roman citizenship, he promised to hear his case when his accusers had

Acts 23 – Paul ministers in chains Rome protects Paul

come down from Jerusalem. In the meantime Paul was commanded to be kept in Herod's palace or Praetorium.

The Roman governor, Felix, had enjoyed a meteoric rise from slavery to a position of political prominence in the Roman Empire. As to his personal life, he was grossly immoral. At the time of his appointment to be governor of the province of Judea, he was husband of three royal ladies. While in office, he fell in love with Drusilla, who was married to Azizus, king of Emesa. According to Josephus, a marriage was arranged through Simon, sorcerer from Cyprus.

He was a cruel despot, as is evidenced by the fact that he arranged the assassination of a high priest named Jonathan, who criticized him for his misrule.

It was this Felix before whom Paul had to appear. – Believers' Bible Commentary