

**Key:**

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

## The Hand of Providence

Acts 22:30–23:35

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to Acts 22. Our passage for today is Acts 22:30–23:35, as part of our series, “No Other Name.” And the key word for today's message is *providence*. And we're going to see in the book of Acts God's hand of providence.

When I was about age 12, my pastor preached a series on marriage. I remember that series very vividly. It stirred something inside of me that set me on a course of hopeful anticipation for my future bride. And one of the things that my pastor encouraged me to do was to begin praying for a wife. So I started praying in earnest. And that might sound a bit strange to you for a 12-year-old to start praying for a wife, but I was really moved by that sermon.

Well sure enough, my future bride around that same time moved from Croatia to Minden, Louisiana, as an exchange student. And while she was being enculturated by southern hospitality and learning the Louisianan dialect of English, I kept praying. And lo and behold, about ten years later we met up in Longview, Texas. Sanja was working as a tax accountant. I was finishing college. And God's grand plan for our life together was unveiled. And we got married.

Now I look back on that whole situation as one of God's great evidences in my life that he is in control, and that he is working out things in my life for the greater good. Even the hard things! I could tell you about all the bumps and bruises that Sanja and I experienced along the way before we got married. God used those things too for his greater purposes.

And again, there's a word that summarizes these magnificent acts of God that bring about his greater purposes. I want everyone in the room to be familiar with this word, and fond of this word, because we're going to see evidence of it in our text today—*providence*.

Providence is God's omniscient directing of our universe and all the affairs of humankind. It's parallel to the term sovereignty, but slightly different. God's sovereignty is his supreme authority to rule all things. God's providence is his wise and faithful ordering of all things toward his purposes. Sovereignty answers the question: Who is in charge? Providence answers the question: How does God actively govern the world?

Wayne Grudem writes in his *Systematic Theology*, “All things come to pass by God's wise providence... The universe is not governed by impersonal fate or luck, but by a personal God. Nothing “just happens”—we should see God's hand in events throughout the day, causing all things to work together for good for those who love him... A deepened appreciation for the doctrine of providence will not make us more superstitious; it will make us trust in God more and obey him more fully.”<sup>1</sup> That's providence.

Now how is this relevant for the passage that we are studying today?<sup>2</sup> Well let me show you in the text.<sup>3</sup> When we last saw Paul, he was having a pretty rough day. After coming to Jerusalem, he was looked on with suspicion by the Jerusalemite believers. So he tried to appease them by taking part in this vow to demonstrate

<sup>1</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 337.

<sup>2</sup> RUDOLF GWALTHER: “In this passage, therefore, we are taught where to find comfort in adversity. Not in the fortunate success of worldly affairs or in hope of living idly and easily, but in the providence of God.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 318.

<sup>3</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 678: “In sum, this passage is rooted in God's providence, which moves to protect God's children, although the means are not always known as they are here. God works behind-the-scenes here.”

his Jewishness. That didn't work... not really. Because during that vow ritual, he is spotted by the crowd in the temple and gets beaten to a bloody pulp.

After that, he's rescued by the Roman soldiers near the temple. He talks the tribune into letting him talk to the crowd. The soldier agrees, and Paul tried to defend himself before the crowd by telling his story and evangelizing them. That didn't work at all. But you got to love Paul for trying.

In fact, the crowd gets even angrier this time around. And they start hollering for Paul to be executed. And the tribune is so confused by this scene that he decides to have Paul flogged until he gets some answers. Paul uses a bit of shrewdness at that point to get out of the torture that the tribune wants to inflict on him. He informs them that he's a Roman citizen, and therefore they can't flog him. And that makes the Roman officer really uncomfortable. And they decide (the Romans anyway) to treat Paul with a little more dignity and respect.

But Paul's troubles aren't over. Look at **chapter 22, verse 30**. This is where our passage today picks up.  
<sup>30</sup> *But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why [Paul] was being accused by the Jews, he [that's the tribune, a high-ranking Roman officer] unbound [Paul] and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.*

This tribune decides, **"I'm going to get to the bottom of this little skirmish between Paul and the Jews."** So he calls the Sanhedrin together and orders them to deliberate.

The tribune knows now that he can't beat Paul and interrogate him, because he's a Roman citizen. He can't risk another scene with the crowds; that'll turn into a nightmare. So maybe he can get a group of honorable Jewish leaders to gather together and quietly, non-violently discuss this issue.<sup>4</sup>

Sounds like a good plan, right? Not a horrible idea.<sup>5</sup> But he doesn't realize how much these Jewish leaders hate Paul... he's about to find out.

So he gathers all these Jewish leaders together and Paul starts to give a defense.<sup>6</sup> Look at **chapter 23, verse 1**.

<sup>1</sup> *And looking intently at the council [the Sanhedrin], Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good<sup>7</sup> conscience<sup>8</sup> up to this day."<sup>9</sup>*

So Paul is unfettered at this point. And he's in the middle of this room with these seventy Jewish leaders. And he looks intently at them.<sup>10</sup> Everyone see that in **verse 1**? Paul is unafraid with a good conscience.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 925: "The fact that Lysias has to order his troops to go to the council hall and take Paul back to the Antonia Fortress once trouble erupts in the Sanhedrin session (23:10) suggests that the Roman commander respected the sensibilities of the Sanhedrin by not insisting on a military presence during the hearing."

<sup>5</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 467: "Lysias's decision to consult this body was a logical one. They would surely have heard about the riot against Paul, and it would be the Jews who understood most clearly the legal ramifications of the incident."

<sup>6</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 669: "In what is surely a condensed account of the scene (Marshall 1980: 362), Paul addresses his audience, since it is Paul's perspective that Luke undertakes to present."

<sup>7</sup> JOHANN SPANGENBERG: "Paul is not here talking about his corrupt nature and inherent sin, which he has in common with all people—this is also true of those who accused him, since we are all together stuck in [original sin]; rather, he is talking about the preaching office, concerning which he is accused. It is as if he wanted to say, "God charged me with the preaching office. To this I am called by God and chosen by the Holy Spirit: to preach the gospel. I have preached with such diligence both among Jews and Gentiles that I hope to stand before God with a good conscience." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 313.

<sup>8</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 925n2228: "The term 'good conscience' (συνείδησις ἀγαθή; also 1 Tim 1:5, 19; 1 Pet 3:16, 21; cf. συνείδησις καλή in Heb 13:18) is synonymous with 'pure conscience' (συνείδησις καθάρᾳ; 1 Tim 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3) and 'clear conscience' (συνείδησις ἀπόσκοπος; Acts 24:16); see Eckstein, *ibid.*, 61–62, 88–91, 303. For references of Paul to his conscience in his letters see Rom 9:1; 13:5; 1 Cor 4:4; 10:25–29; 2 Cor 1:12; 2:17; 4:2; 5:11; cf. also 1 Cor 8:7–13 (the conscience of the weak)."

<sup>9</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 926: "This included his activity as a persecutor of the Christians (cf. 22:4–5) from the perspective of his theological convictions before his conversion to Jesus as Israel's Messiah... Paul asserts that 'as for righteousness based on the law' he was 'faultless' (γενόμενος ἄμεμπτος; Phil 3:6)... Paul's opening statement is a direct response to the charge that he is teaching everyone everywhere against the people of God, against the law, and against the temple (21:28)." Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 468: "Such a remark was itself something of a provocation. If Paul's life as a Christian left him in complete innocence before God, then the Sanhedrin members who did not share his commitment to Christ were the guilty parties."

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 36: "Paul began by taking a long look at the Sanhedrin (the same word used in Acts 1 for the apostles' gazing toward Heaven as Christ ascended)."

And Paul starts to talk. And I get the sense that he's going to start preaching the gospel *again*. That's what Paul does. **Come hell or high-water, he's going to tell people about Jesus.**

But unfortunately here, he never gets the chance. Look at **verse 2**.

<sup>2</sup> *And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by [Paul] to strike him on the mouth.*<sup>12</sup>

I don't know why Ananias does this. I don't know if he thinks Paul was being blasphemous with his statement.<sup>13</sup> Or maybe he thought Paul was being dishonest by saying "I have lived my life before God in all good conscience." I don't know. Honestly, I just think this was just a power play. This high priest Ananias wasn't about to let Paul start being persuasive. So he smacks him around a little bit to cut him down to size.

And here's a bit of historical background for you. This high priest, Ananias, was a very disreputable high priest. This was not the Annas (related to Caiphas) who interrogated Jesus in **John 18**. This is a different guy about twenty-five years after Christ's crucifixion.

And this guy, Ananias, was infamous as a priest.<sup>14</sup> He was notorious for his greed. His tenure as the high priest was filled with scandal and misbehavior. Josephus records that he was quick-tempered and ruthless. He was eventually murdered by Jewish zealots in AD 66 for his pro-Roman sympathies. He was not a good man, so his cruelty here shouldn't surprise us.

What does surprise us is Paul's response! Because look at **verse 3**.

<sup>3</sup> *Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!"*

Goodness gracious! That doesn't sound like Paul, does it?<sup>15</sup> A whitewashed wall is a wall that is structurally unsound but is covered over with white plaster so that it looks okay. This is a very descriptive statement about a person's hypocrisy.<sup>16</sup> **Paul is calling this high priest a "stinking hypocrite!"**<sup>17</sup>

*Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?"*

Paul just loses it with this guy. Paul is saying here, **"I should be innocent until proven guilty."**<sup>18</sup> **That's the Jewish law! So who do you think you are judging me according to the law when you are a lawbreaker?"**

You might say, **"Yeah, Paul give it to 'em. Give it to 'em. Don't let them intimidate you. Don't back down, man. Stand up for yourself. Exact your revenge!"**

Here's the problem though. The Bible says, "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing" (**1 Pet 3:9**). **Even Paul himself said,**

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<sup>11</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 467n62: "The word translated 'fulfilled my duty' by the NIV is πολιτεύομαι, which is literally 'to live as a citizen.' Citizenship was a big issue for Paul throughout chaps. 21–26—Tarsian, Roman, Jewish. Here Paul stressed that his ultimate citizenship was lived under God's rule."

<sup>12</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 465: "Everything that is known about Ananias fits his actions in Acts 23:2, when he commanded his servants that stood by Paul to smite him on the mouth. For Jews, this was particularly offensive. It was an action also taken against Yeshua in John 18:22–23."

<sup>13</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 137–8: "Ananias probably understands Paul to be claiming that he, though a Christian convert, still serves Yahweh and lives as a faithful Jew. For Ananias the two identities—Christian and Jew—are incompatible. Thus, Paul's words are tantamount to blasphemy in the view of Ananias."

<sup>14</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 669: "The high priest Ananias served from about AD 47 to AD 58 or 59 (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.5.2 §103). He had a reputation for being insolent and quick-tempered." Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 468: "His action was completely in character. Josephus depicted him as one of the very worst of the high priests, known for his pro-Roman sentiments, his extreme cruelty, and his greed."

<sup>15</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 138: "A wide chasm of disparity separates the trial narratives of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and Paul here in Acts 23. Jesus responded to his accusers with calmness and silence. He spoke only a few words. Paul, however, pulls no punches and lashes out against the high priest."

<sup>16</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 468: "Jesus used the same image to depict hypocrisy, referring to the practice of whitewashing tombs as a warning to people that the defilement of dead bones lay within (Matt 23:27). Paul may also have had in mind Ezekiel's image of a crumbling wall covered with whitewash to conceal its decay, ready to fall with the first rainstorm (Ezek 13:10f.)."

<sup>17</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 36: "Paul was saying that Ananias, though he looked okay on the outside, was full of decaying filth. This was angry, impulsive retaliation. Paul had momentarily lost control. His bitter reply was far different from his Lord's, for 'when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats' (1 Peter 2:23). God's Word does not touch up its pictures of the lives of the saints. When an apostle or patriarch falls — David's adultery and murder, Jonah's pouting, Peter's violence — his failure is honestly recorded."

<sup>18</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 927: "Since the Mosaic law treats people who are accused of breaking the law as innocent until proven guilty, this has not (yet) happened, so Paul accuses Ananias of not adhering to the principle of impartiality."

“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:17–18).

You might say, **“That’s easy for you to say, Tony. You weren’t the one who just got punched in the face.”** Touché.

But let me ask you a question. Who’s this spoken of in the Bible? “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet 2:23). Who’s that spoken of? That’s Jesus. That Peter talking about Jesus in his letter, **1 Peter**.

And Paul, who up to this point in Jerusalem has humbly and admirably imitated his Savior, in this instance, his flesh got the best of him and he snapped.<sup>19</sup> **“God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!”** I mean, what is that? That’s a curse. **And I don’t think Paul said this with a calm tone... I’m sure Paul said that red-faced, blood-boiling as an invective against this high priest. And that is not the same display of love and tenderness that Paul so admirably demonstrated to the crowd that had beaten him up in the temple. Something snapped in Paul and his flesh got the best of him!**

**Go ahead and take your notes and write this down. I want to give you today four summary statements of what happens to Paul in this passage. And I want to follow up each of those statements with the big idea for this message. The big idea is this: “God providentially works all things together for good.”**

**And the first of these statements is as follows:**

1) When a saint **stumbles**, God providentially works all things together for good (22:30–23:5)

**When a saint does less than Jesus... when a saint lets his or her flesh get the best of him or her... when a saint screws up royally... God providentially works all things together for good.**<sup>20</sup>

**I’m drawing that phraseology, by the way, from Romans 8:28 where Paul himself writes, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” That Paul’s own statement in Romans 8:28! That not the ivory-tower philosophizing of a man unaccustomed to suffering.**

**Alistair Begg said about Paul that he did not work “his theology in the context of some cloistered tranquility, but he [hammered] out his theology on the anvil of experience.”<sup>21</sup> Paul suffered and was persecuted severely. And he even failed the Lord on occasion. Paul was not sinless like Jesus. And even so, he could say “God works all things together for the good (the good things and the bad things and even my failures!) ... Why? ... to accomplish his sovereign purposes.”**

**You might say, “What does that have to do with me, Pastor Tony? I’m not a saint.” Well, it has everything to do with you. And yes, you are a saint. I’m not using that word in the way the Catholics use it—Saint Paul. And I’m not using it to describe someone who is supposedly sinless. That’s not possible on this side of eternity other than Christ. If you are a born-again follower of Jesus, then you are a saint according to the NT.**

**And who in here hasn’t stumbled like Paul does in Acts 23? Who in here hasn’t lost their temper or lashed out sinfully from time to time? Or who in here has failed to speak lovingly of those who oppose Christ?**

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<sup>19</sup> Many commentators over the years have tried to justify Paul’s actions as boldness, prophecy, or deserved by the high priest. See especially the comments by Chrysostom, Augustine, and Bede in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 276–7.

<sup>20</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 138: “We could say Paul lost his temper and that this is behavior we should not seek to emulate when called to give a defense of the gospel. On the other hand, Jesus himself used harsh language when speaking to the Jewish leaders, even the Sanhedrin. Indeed, Paul’s language here bears a resemblance to Jesus’ words in Matthew 23:27, when he said, ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs’ ... When presented with a difficult interpretive decision, oftentimes the simplest explanation offers the safest route. Most likely, Paul did lose his temper and lashed out in a moment of frustration. He believed he had been severely mistreated and he let his audience know it. Once told whom he was addressing, Paul offered an apology, grounding his confession not in the character of Ananias but in the Old Testament Scriptures.”

<sup>21</sup> See his sermon on Acts 22:30-23:11 entitled, “In All Things God Works...,” 10-02-05:

<https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/all-things-god-works/>

**Let's take a vote... Has anyone here failed to meet up to the perfect standard of Christ? Some of you might say, "Pastor Tony, I didn't even make it through this morning without failing to meet the perfect standard of Christ!" If that's you, here's my encouragement to you. God loves you. His blood covers over your sins—past, present, and future. You are still a child of God. And God will providentially use even your stumbling for his ultimate purposes.**<sup>22</sup>

Now does that excuse you sin? No, in fact Paul doesn't excuse his sin. Look at **verse 4**.

<sup>4</sup> Those who stood by said, "Would you revile<sup>23</sup> God's high priest?"

These guys in the Sanhedrin were just shocked at Paul's insolence. **"Would you revile God's high priest?" A lesser man like myself might say, "You bet, I do! And another thing..."**

But watch what Paul does. Look at **verse 5**.

<sup>5</sup> And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest,

Paul's been in Gentile lands for the last few years, he hasn't kept track of Jewish politics.<sup>24</sup>  
for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.' "

Now what is that, right there? That's repentance. Was the high priest right for striking Paul? No. But Paul doesn't make excuses. Paul doesn't blame-shift or say **"The devil made me do it."** Paul says simply, **"I was wrong; and according to Scriptures (Exod 22:28) I shouldn't have said that."** Good for Paul.

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And look what happens next in **verse 6**. If you thought Paul's honest repentance would have taken the temperature down a bit in the Sanhedrin, you were wrong.

<sup>6</sup> Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council,

The Sanhedrin had two separate political parties that had significant philosophical differences between them, even though they were both Jewish. **And if you thought there was rancor between Republicans and Democrats in America, you ain't seen nothing yet!**

And Paul is about to exploit those differences!<sup>25</sup>

"Brothers, I am<sup>26</sup> a Pharisee,<sup>27</sup> a son of Pharisees.<sup>28</sup> It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead<sup>29</sup> that I am on trial."<sup>30</sup> <sup>7</sup> And when he had said this, a dissension<sup>31</sup> arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. <sup>8</sup> For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.

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<sup>22</sup> JOHN DONNE: "The benefit that we are to make of the errors of holy people is not that 'that person did this, therefore I may do it,' but this, 'God suffered that holy person to fall and still loved that good soul well; God therefore has not cast me away; he suffers me to fall, too.'" Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 315.

<sup>23</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 670: "This is the only occurrence of the verb (λοιδορέω, *loidoreō*, revile) in Acts. It is a common term for religious disputes but appears in only three other places in the NT (John 9:28 [Jews reacting to Jesus]; 1 Cor. 4:12 [when reviled, we bless]; 1 Pet. 2:23 [of Jesus reviled at his death])."

<sup>24</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 927: "It is not impossible that Paul in fact did not know Ananias personally: the last time he was in Jerusalem (in AD 51, i.e., six years earlier) likely was the time when Ummidius Quadratus, recently appointed as governor of Syria, had sent Ananias in chains to Rome."

<sup>25</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 139: "This section provides a parable for our modern times. Many opponents of Christianity today highlight the innumerable denominations and sects which exist in the church. The charge goes something like this: 'How can Christians lay any claim to the truth if they themselves have divided so many times and cannot present a united message?' The scene in Acts 23, however, is a reminder that opponents of Christianity often disagree within their own camps on issues of truth, too. The charge can easily be turned back on those who so confidently level it at the Christian faith. Left to ourselves, humanity will never think and act in a way in accordance with the truth. Only through God's grace and God's revelation—which comes from outside of humanity and was incarnated in humanity—can humanity know the truth and embody the truth. Christians, like all humans, sometimes disagree, but Jesus is the Truth (John 14:6). We must look to the Word to discover the truth."

<sup>26</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 928: "The formulation in the present tense (εἶμι) may imply that Paul still regarded himself as a Pharisee in some sense, although most certainly not in the "party" sense of the word (i.e., as ἀρρεσις, as described by Josephus) but in terms of their belief in the resurrection, in angels and spirits, and in their devotion to God's revelation of his will in the law, transmitted, preserved, and developed (!) in written and oral tradition."

<sup>27</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 466: "He declared that he himself was a Pharisee. He used the present tense because, in his basic theology, this was still true; he still followed basic tenets of Pharisaism, such as the resurrection of the dead."

<sup>28</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 466: "He was also a son of Pharisees, meaning that he was either a descendant of a long line of Pharisees or that he was trained by Pharisees."

Here's the issue historically. The Sadducees were the liberal party of the Jews. They were anti-supernaturalists, so they didn't believe in any kind of afterlife.<sup>32</sup> They didn't believe in any Scriptures, other than the first five books of the OT.<sup>33</sup> They were liberal.<sup>34</sup> And they were the majority in the Sanhedrin. Ananias the high priest was a Sadducee.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, they had their own problems. But they were conservative theologically. They believed in a resurrection. They believed in the coming of the Messiah. They just didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah.

And Paul was a Pharisee. He had come to believe in Jesus. So perhaps he's thinking, **"I might be able to win some of these Pharisees over to Jesus. They've got more in common with me than the Sadducees."** So he starts this little debate in the Sanhedrin. Maybe that was his intention here—to start this debate. Or perhaps he was trying to get the attention off of him and onto a more important topic, "the resurrection." Maybe then, he could talk to them about Jesus's resurrection. Or perhaps, Paul was just mischievously trying to discredit all of these men in front of the tribune by starting this argument.<sup>35</sup>

Whatever the case, I doubt it was Paul's intention to start another ruckus.<sup>36</sup> But unfortunately that's what happened. Because look at **verse 9**.

<sup>9</sup> Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended<sup>37</sup> sharply, "We find nothing wrong in this man."<sup>38</sup>

Wow! That's a shocking reversal, right there!<sup>39</sup>

What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?"

What? I don't know about that.

<sup>10</sup> And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces<sup>40</sup> by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 928: "For Paul, the belief in the resurrection is not a game but the central truth of his witness, since it was the incontrovertible reality that converted him from a persecutor of believers in Jesus to a follower of Jesus who saw the crucified Jesus on the road to Damascus as the risen Jesus who is alive, revealing himself as Israel's Messiah, Savior, and Lord."

<sup>30</sup> JOHN CALVIN: "Paul's stratagem, which Luke reports, seems out of keeping with a servant of Christ. For the astuteness which he used was closely related to a bluff that was not far removed from lying. He says that the circumstances of his case turn on the resurrection of the dead. But we know that the issue was about other matters, that he abrogated the ceremonies and admitted the Gentiles to the covenant of salvation." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 316.

<sup>31</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 929: "The Greek term (στάσις) also means 'uprising, revolt'—is ironic in the sense that this is what Ananias and the elders accuse Paul of causing among the Jewish people when they bring official charges before Felix (24:5)."

<sup>32</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 673: "Being a believing Jew means having hope, including hope in resurrection. In the Mishnah, denial of the afterlife leads to a strong rebuke, as m. *Sanh.* 10.1 reads, 'He that says there is no resurrection of the dead prescribed in the law' has no share in the life to come."

<sup>33</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 929: "While a few passages in the Hebrew Scriptures could be interpreted in terms of the resurrection of the dead, it was only later passages such as Ezek 37:1–14 and Dan 12:1–3 that explicitly spoke about the resurrection of the dead, a fact that made the interpretation of these passages a point of contention."

<sup>34</sup> CHRYSOSTOM: "The Sadducees know of nothing incorporeal, perhaps not even God, so thick-headed are they. Consequently, they are also unwilling to believe that there is a resurrection." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 279.

<sup>35</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 466: "Paul knew that he was not about to get a fair hearing, as the action of the high priest clearly showed. He decided to use the principle of 'divide and conquer' by making a loud proclamation before the Sanhedrin."

<sup>36</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 36: "Later, when Paul stood before Felix, he hinted that his action before the Sanhedrin was a misdeed that he regretted (24:20-21)."

<sup>37</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 673: "They 'were contending' (διεμάχοντο, *diemachonto*) with each other back and forth. This is the only instance of this verb in the NT. It means 'vie for' something, 'fight for' something verbally."

<sup>38</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 470n72: "The contrasting portrait of the Pharisees in Luke's two volumes is interesting. In his Gospel they were Jesus' enemies. In Acts they are generally portrayed in a favorable light. Surely behind this difference is the fact that for the early church it was the Pharisees who were most amenable to Christianity."

<sup>39</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 470: "Other of the Pharisees had become Christians (cf. 15:5). Even in the Sanhedrin it was the Pharisaic segment that had on an earlier occasion come to the defense of the Christians (5:34–40)."

<sup>40</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 674: "The only other NT occurrence of the verb διασπᾶω (*diaspaō*) is in Mark 5:4, where the demon-possessed man tears apart his chains as he wanders among the tombs. Judges 14:6 LXX (Alexandrinus text) uses it to describe how Samson tore apart a lion. The tribune commands the soldiers to take Paul back to the barracks to protect Paul."

Another attempt to preach the gospel by Paul. Another failure! Everywhere Paul goes in Jerusalem he is failing miserably. In Corinth and Ephesus, all he had to do was say a few words and people gave their lives to Christ! Here Paul can't do anything right. And everywhere he goes people respond to him with violence.

Can you imagine how discouraging that would be? All kinds of suffering and persecution with no conversions to counterbalance it! I mean people wanted to kill him in Corinth and Ephesus too, but at least he had people coming to Christ! But in Jerusalem, Paul courageously tries to preach the gospel to his Jewish brethren and what does he have to show for it? Two riots. Multiple attempts to kill him! Paul's whole trip to Jerusalem has been a complete disaster. From a human perspective, nothing good has happened.

But watch this in **verse 11**. **You know, I have found that in some of my darkest days, when I feel like a complete failure, that is when God shows up with his best displays of grace and comfort.** And I can just imagine Paul sitting up late at night trying to sleep. His face still hurting from the blow he suffered in the Sanhedrin. His body still smarting from getting beaten up in the temple.

But worse than the physical pain is the emotional pain of a missed opportunity. **“Why did I have to smart off like that to the high priest?” “Why didn't I just play it cool and tell them about Jesus?” “Why did I mention the resurrection and get that debate started between the Pharisees and Sadducees?” “What a wasted opportunity!”**

But was it a wasted opportunity? Let's see what Jesus says. Look at **verse 11**.

<sup>11</sup> *The following night*

That's the day after the riot in the Sanhedrin.

<sup>11</sup> *The following night the Lord<sup>42</sup> stood<sup>43</sup> by him<sup>44</sup> and said, “Take courage,<sup>45</sup>*

By the way, this Greek expression for “take courage” is only uttered by Jesus in the NT.<sup>46</sup> Similar to what Jesus does with his disciples in the gospels, he stands by Paul in the middle of the night as his servant is suffering.<sup>47</sup> In one of Paul's darkest moments, when Paul feels like an absolute failure, Jesus says to him: “Take courage.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 931: “Thus ended Paul's appearance before the Sanhedrin—with a different outcome than the hearings of Jesus and of Stephen, who had both been executed.”

<sup>42</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 932: “The Lord (ὁ κύριος), i.e., the risen Lord whose resurrection is the center of Paul's proclamation and the main reason for the dispute with the Jewish opponents, appears to Paul in a vision standing at his side (αὐτῷ), thus expressing his support, and speaks to him.”

<sup>43</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 468: “This was the fourth time the Messiah appeared to Paul in a vision. The first time was on the Damascus Road in Acts 9:5. The second time was during the Temple vision in the context of Acts 9:29–30, described by Luke in Acts 22:17–21. The third time was on the foreign field, in Acts 18:9–10.”

<sup>44</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 674: “As uncertain as things appear to the tribune and others, this appearance indicates that the Lord has a plan that Paul will carry out.”

<sup>45</sup> JOHN CALVIN: “The main point is that Paul is to bear himself with confidence, because he is going to be a witness for Christ at Rome also. But this seems to be cold and empty comfort. It is as if he said, ‘Do not be afraid, because a far harder situation is awaiting you.’ For, according to the flesh, it would have been preferable to die once and for all, getting it over quickly, than to languish in chains for a long period of time. The Lord does not promise him freedom, not even a favorable outcome. He is merely protracting for a long time the troubles, which already press on him more than enough. But from this we gather better how very important in itself is this confidence, that in our afflictions God cares for us, although he may not put out his hand at once to help us. Therefore let us learn even in the very worst afflictions to rest on the Word of God alone, and let us never be disheartened as long as he revives us by the testimony of his fatherly love.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 318.

<sup>46</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 36: “Only Christ uses this word in the New Testament, and all five instances brought wonderful comfort. He called to the bedridden paralytic, ‘Take heart [Courage], son; your sins are forgiven’ (Matthew 9:2). To the woman with the twelve-year hemorrhage he said, ‘Take heart [Courage], daughter, your faith has healed you’ (Matthew 9:22). To his frightened disciples as he came to them across the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee he said, ‘Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid’ (Matthew 14:27). In the Upper Room, on the night of his crucifixion, he said, ‘Take heart [Courage]! I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). This is Christ's unique word for all who are trying to serve him, however feebly!”

<sup>47</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 140: “That night, when Paul is alone, unsure of his future, and perhaps entertaining thoughts of fear and anxiety, the Lord visits the apostle with words of comfort.”

<sup>48</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 471: “The Lord had certainly prepared him well for the events that had just transpired in Jerusalem (20:23; 21:10f.). Still they had been particularly trying—the mob in the temple square, the arrest, the attempted scourging, the violence of the Sanhedrin. To what was it all leading? The Lord's words assured him that there was a divine purpose in all that had happened to him.”

“Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify<sup>49</sup> also in Rome.”<sup>50</sup>

Paul’s like, “Testified about you in Jerusalem. All I’ve done here is start riots all over the city.” But that’s not how Jesus sees it.<sup>51</sup> Jesus is pleased with his efforts. Jesus is proud of him.<sup>52</sup> And Jesus gives him a new lease on life. Jesus tells him, “Not only are you going to survive this predicament in Jerusalem, but you are going to go to Rome and testify about me there.”<sup>53</sup>

**Write this down as a second point from the message:**

2) When a saint **“fails to succeed,”** God providentially works all things together for good (23:6–11)

**The story is told about the famous pianist Paderewski who was to perform at a great concert hall in America.<sup>54</sup> It was to be a grand affair with all of the social and intellectual elites of the country gathered. But also gathered in that concert hall was a fidgety nine-year boy who failed to appreciate this Paderewski brilliance. This boy had started piano lessons, and his mother brought him to see the great Polish pianist perform. But the boy was there against his wishes. And as she turned to talk to some friends, the nervous little boy mischievously jumped up onto the stage and drew near to the magnificent Steinway Grand Piano. And he sat down and started playing “Chopsticks.” It’s a simple little piano piece for beginners.**

**Well the audience was incensed by the impudence of this little boy. And they began to shout with agitation, “Get the boy away from that piano! Who’d bring a kid like that to a concert? Where’s his mother?” I’m sure you can imagine how mortified his mother was.**

**Well backstage Paderewski heard this commotion. And so he quickly grabbed his coat and rushed on stage without any introduction. And he stooped behind the boy with his arms over and around the boy and he began to improvise a countermelody to chopsticks. And they played together. And Paderewski kept whispering in the boy’s ear, “Keep going. Keep playing, son. Don’t stop. Don’t quit.” And so this brilliant pianist virtuoso took the miserable failure of this little boy and his mother and made it into something beautiful.**

**And so it is with our service to Christ. I don’t tell you that story to encourage mischievous behavior in our congregation. I tell you that story to comfort you with the fact that Jesus improvises our mistakes and failures and turns them into something good. God providentially works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.**

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Now God’s providence is going to be tested in the next few verses of **Acts 23**. Or maybe it’s better to say it this way—Paul’s *confidence in God’s providence* is about to be tested in the next few verses. And Luke is going to show us, the readers, just how in control of everything God is.

**But before we get to that, write this down as the third point from this passage.**

3) When a saint is **endangered**, God providentially works all things together for good (23:12–24)

Now just to clarify, I can’t say that when a saint is endangered that God will always rescue him or her from that danger. I can’t say that, because that’s not a universal principle.<sup>55</sup> Because what happened to John the Baptist? He was beheaded. What happened to James? He was killed by Herod. What happened to Stephen? He

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<sup>49</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 932: “This encouragement implies the Lord’s commendation of Paul’s past witness (διεμαρτύρω) in Jerusalem to the Sanhedrin, and it expresses the Lord’s promise of protection for Paul’s future witness (μαρτυρησαι) in Rome.”

<sup>50</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 471: “Paul had already expressed his own desire to visit Rome (19:21). Now the visit received the Lord’s endorsement.”

<sup>51</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 36: “His dreams of effective testimony to the Jews lay in ashes at his feet, and his vision for successful witness in Rome began to fade too.”

<sup>52</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 468: “Messiah did not rebuke Paul for coming to Jerusalem. Rather, the apostle was to testify about Him in the city, showing again that Paul was in God’s will.”

<sup>53</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 679: “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 be possible. It is one of the mysteries of God 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 for ourselves.”

<sup>54</sup> Taken and abridged from Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 36.

<sup>55</sup> JOHN CALVIN: “Because oracles are not sent from heaven now, and the Lord himself does not appear by visions, we must meditate on his innumerable promises, by which he affirms that he will always be near us.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 318.

was stoned to death.<sup>56</sup> **I can't promise you that God rescues every saint from adversity. But I can promise you this—God providentially works all things together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.**<sup>57</sup>

**I can't promise you that God will remove the cancer in your body. I can't promise you that God will give you that thing that your heart so desperately desires. I can't promise you that God will remove the pain or the suffering or the hardship in your life. But I can promise you that, if you are a child of God, God loves you and will providentially work for your good. Even if you have to wait for eternity to experience that goodness—which by the way will be a million times better than anything we've ever experienced in this world—you will experience God's goodness. I promise you.**

One commentator, the church father, **John Chrysostom**, asks this question, **“Why didn't [Jesus] appear to [Paul] before he fell into danger?”** In other words, why didn't Jesus appear to Paul before he made a mess of things and suffered great persecution at the hands of the Jews and Romans? And this is how John Chrysostom answers that question. **“Because, as always, it is in affliction that God consoles. For then he appears more desirable, as he trains us even in the midst of dangers.”**<sup>58</sup>

Let me put that a little more succinctly—we as Christians grow through pain. Sometimes we say things like, **“God, please take this painful thing away!”** And God's like, **“Take this thing away. That's the thing that is making you stronger. That's the thing that's forcing you to come on me. Why would I take that away?”**

**When a saint is suffering... when a saint is hurting... God stands by you in that. Just like Jesus stood by Paul. And God won't waste that suffering. He will use it to bring about his greater purpose in your life.**

Now watch this. You want evidence that God's promises are true? Look what happens with Paul in **verse 12.**

<sup>12</sup> *When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath<sup>59</sup> neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.*

These guys take an oath (literally they “anathematize” themselves)<sup>60</sup> saying that they won't eat or drink until they kill Paul. That's how much these guys hate Paul and the gospel he proclaims.<sup>61</sup>

Look at **verse 13.**

<sup>13</sup> *There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. <sup>14</sup> They went to the chief priests<sup>62</sup> and elders and said, “We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath [literally we have anathematized ourselves with an anathema] to taste no food till we have killed Paul.*

<sup>15</sup> *Now therefore you,*

By the way, these are the conspirators telling the chief priests and elders what to do! These guys are as insolent and dismissive as Paul was earlier. But the leaders don't have a problem with it here.

<sup>15</sup> *Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring [Paul] down<sup>63</sup> to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near.”*

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<sup>56</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 678–9: “Stephen's martyrdom shows that providence also does not always mean physical rescue as here with Paul.”

<sup>57</sup> JOHANN SPANGENBERG: “God does not console his people in this way, nor does he promise to them that they will not suffer at all; rather, much more that they should be prepared and ready for the coming tribulations and persecutions. For God's children must be tried like gold in fire.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 320.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 279.

<sup>59</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 677: “The irony is that they take an oath before God that actually violates God's standards and will.”

<sup>60</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 677: “The verb ἀναθεματίζω (*anathematizō*, bind with an oath) is used only four times in the NT, three of them in this passage (vv. 14, 21). In Mark 14:71, it refers to the oath Peter invoked to deny that he knew Jesus.”

<sup>61</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 472: “They placed themselves under an anathema, a curse, probably in some such form as ‘May I be cursed/eternally damned if ...’ One wonders if they died of hunger or thirst, for their vow was surely not fulfilled. Actually, the Jewish law provided for the release from a vow that was unfulfillable because of some unforeseen circumstance (Mishna, *Nedarim* 3.3).”

<sup>62</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 678: “At a narrative level, the high priest's involvement in this conspiracy shows the truth of Paul's insult in verse 3 that the priest is a whitewashed wall. This is because the priest agrees to deception and violates the law he is supposed to defend. His undercutting of a legal process entails injustice and potential murder. The entire group has contemplated violating one of the Ten Commandments.”

So these conspirators devise a plot to kill Paul. And what's shocking about this plot is that not only are they willing to anathematize themselves and take no food or drink until Paul is dead. They are conspiring now against the Roman Empire.

Inevitably if this plot is carried out, they will kill Paul, but also a good number of Roman soldiers. And whenever people did that to the Romans, you can be sure that the Romans retaliated with vengeance. So this was a dastardly plot that would involve a lot of innocent bloodshed. That's how much these guys hated Paul and the message that he has brought to Jerusalem.<sup>64</sup>

Now watch what happens next. **By the way, who's in control of this situation? The conspirators or God? Jesus said that Paul was going to Rome. These conspirators say he's not getting out of Jerusalem alive? Who's going to be right?**<sup>65</sup> Watch what God does!

<sup>16</sup> Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.

Now we don't know anything else about Paul's sister or his nephew. We didn't even know Paul had a nephew! And we don't know what his nephew was doing in Jerusalem. Maybe he was in Jerusalem training to be a Pharisee just like his uncle Paul was thirty years earlier. We don't know how his nephew heard about this ambush. Maybe he was related to one of the conspirators and heard about the plot to kill Paul. Maybe he had a soft spot for uncle Paul and doesn't want him to die.

We don't even know if this nephew is a believer. He may have just been a Jew in the city who didn't want to see bloodshed with his uncle. Whatever the case, God sovereignly works it out to where now the conspiracy is uncovered and Paul can be protected.

Look at **verse 17**.

<sup>17</sup> Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him."<sup>66</sup> <sup>18</sup> So [the centurion] took [Paul's nephew] and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you."<sup>19</sup> The tribune took [the young man]<sup>67</sup> by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?"<sup>20</sup> And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him."<sup>21</sup> But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed [Paul]. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent."<sup>68</sup>

<sup>22</sup> So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things."<sup>23</sup> Then he called two of the centurions and said, "Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night."<sup>69</sup> <sup>24</sup> Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 933: "This request will force Lysias to bring Paul down (καταγάγη) from the Antonia Fortress to the council hall of the Sanhedrin, either across the outer court of the temple to one of the gates in the western boundary of the Temple Mount that gave access to the road below, or via the direct access from the Antonia into the city."

<sup>64</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 470: "The Jerusalem Talmud adds: 'He that has made a vow not to eat anything, woe to him if he eats; woe to him if he does not eat. If he eat, he sins against his vow; if he does not eat, he sins against his life. What should such a man do in such a case? Let him go to the sages and they will loose his vow.'"

<sup>65</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 143: "The Jewish plot did not surprise God. He knew exactly what would happen and, before they even hatched their plot, had already curtailed their efforts. As the narrative unfolds, God's providential protection continually guides Paul along his journey to Rome. The road of God's providence may contain much difficulty, but we walk along it with God."

<sup>66</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 942: "While Paul knows that the Lord has pledged deliverance from the hands of the Jews with the promise that he will reach Rome (23:11), he is actively involved in escaping dangerous situations. While followers of Jesus are willing to die for the faith, they do not seek martyrdom. They accept help from outsiders, even from rather unlikely quarters, if it allows them to live another day—as witnesses of the Lord."

<sup>67</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 678: "The nephew is described in a manner that makes him either a teenager (νεανίσκον, *neaniskon*, v. 18) ... or in his twenties (νεανίαν, *neanian*, v. 17)."

<sup>68</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 473: "Verses 20–21 repeat the content of vv. 12–15. From the perspective of information, they contribute nothing new. The repetition, however, increases the dramatic effect considerably. With each new reference to the plot, the threat to Paul's life becomes more ominous."

<sup>69</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 141–2: "Claudius knows that Paul's Roman citizenship affords him the right to access the Roman legal process. Jerusalem, and the volatile situation erupting there, is clearly no place for Paul to get the trial he deserves. So Claudius hatches a plan to get Paul from Jerusalem to Felix, the governor, in Caesarea."

<sup>70</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 681: "He was a favored freed slave, appointed by the emperor Claudius. Felix's rule began in AD 52 or 53 and likely ended in AD 59 or 60, when he was recalled for his failure to deal well with Jewish violence. His third wife was Drusilla,

Now let me point out a couple things here. First notice in **verse 23** that they leave in the third hour of the night. That's like 9pm by our reckoning. They are leaving immediately to get Paul out of there and avoid this bloodshed.

Secondly notice Paul's military entourage to Caesarea. The tribune sends 200 foot soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen to go with Paul. That's 470 well-armed, well-trained soldiers. That's a small army, right there, for one Jewish guy!

And here's the point. If God wants something done, he's going to get it done. In this case, God raises up an army of Roman soldiers to protect Paul.<sup>71</sup> (How ironic is that! These are the guys who wanted to flog Paul a few days before this). God raises up a small army of Roman soldiers to transport Paul to Caesarea, which will be his first stop on the long voyage to Rome.<sup>72</sup>

Jesus promised Paul that he's going to Rome. Sure enough, the first leg of that adventure is now underway.<sup>73</sup>

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Now watch what happens next. This'll be a nice little set up for next week's message. Look at **verse 25**.

<sup>25</sup> And he [that's the tribune] wrote a letter<sup>74</sup> to this effect: <sup>26</sup> "Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. <sup>27</sup> This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen.

Okay, there's a little bit of revisionist history here with this letter. This guy, Claudius, is a little loose with the facts.<sup>75</sup> If you remember, he didn't find out Paul was a Roman citizen until after he had bound him and ordered him to be flogged. But it's probably best that he leave that out of the official report.

<sup>28</sup> And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. <sup>29</sup> I found that he was being accused about questions of their law,<sup>76</sup> but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.<sup>77</sup> <sup>30</sup> And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him."<sup>78</sup>

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daughter of Herod Agrippa I, and his first was the granddaughter (or great-granddaughter) of Antony and Cleopatra. Felix's rule was violent and chaotic, as the Zealots began to emerge during his time. In defense of Roman authority, he ruthlessly tried to put them down, only heightening the violence." Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 476: "The high procuratorial office granted Felix was something almost unheard of for a former slave and was doubtless secured through his brother's influence in the imperial court. That it was considered with disdain in some Roman circles is reflected in Tacitus's judgment that Felix 'wielded royal power with the instincts of a slave' (*History* 5.9)."

<sup>71</sup> JOHN CALVIN: "We must reflect on the prudence of the tribune, so that faith may lift up its eyes to heaven and perceive that God is directing the heart of this worldly man by a secret inspiration and that he also is the leader for the journey for Paul and the soldiers, so that he may reach Caesarea in safety." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 322.

<sup>72</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 473: "By the hand of a Greek soldier in the Roman army, Paul would be rescued. In the future, he would die by the hands of Rome, but at this point, he was being protected by them."

<sup>73</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 684: "This passage continues to develop how God has providentially made it possible for Paul to travel to Rome to witness to the empire's highest levels."

<sup>74</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 682: "Such a letter was common in this situation. It was known as a *litterae dimissoriae*, a letter sent in case of an appeal."

<sup>75</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 142–3: "Claudius, of course, does not reveal the whole truth here. He doesn't mention that he did not learn of Paul's citizenship until he had given the order to have Paul arrested and flogged, which actually violated Paul's rights as a Roman citizen. He only recounts that he realized that Paul was not guilty of anything deserving death, and that the dispute had to do with Jewish, and not Roman, law (v 29). Luke is contrasting the self-serving soldier and his half-truthful letter with the Christ-exalting apostle and his fully truthful testimony."

<sup>76</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 475: "One wonders how he could have understood what was going on, since the whole proceeding was doubtless conducted in Aramaic. He probably arranged for an interpreter, which was the usual practice in such circumstances. He certainly learned enough from the proceeding to realize that the whole debate involved "questions about their law" and not any infraction of Roman law."

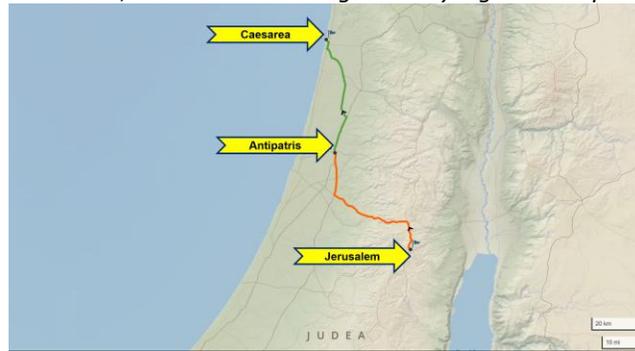
<sup>77</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 938: "Lysias asserts that he has come to the conclusion that Paul is not guilty of any criminal charge (ἐγκλημα) that would warrant a death sentence (ἄξιον θανάτου). This is the important statement, which exonerates Paul from having violated the criminal law of Rome in a matter for which Roman citizens must be punished with execution."

<sup>78</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 476: "His plan was to wait until Paul was safely out of Jerusalem, then tell the Sanhedrin that they would have to travel to Caesarea to explain their accusations against Paul before Felix."

So that's the letter that the tribune, Claudius Lysias, sends with Paul. And he's sending Paul to Caesarea to get a fair trial and to get out of harm's way in Jerusalem.

And here's where the narrative picks up after that letter. Look at **verse 31**.

<sup>31</sup> So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris.



Paul is sent to Felix in Caesarea<sup>79</sup>

Here's the map showing Paul's travels to Antipatris.<sup>80</sup> He spend a day there, before continuing on to Caesarea. He's been to Caesarea before. Of course, this is the place where Paul met with Phillip and the other believers. They tried to persuade him not to go to Jerusalem. Paul went anyway. And now the Romans are bringing Paul back to Caesarea in chains awaiting trial.

Look at **verse 32**.

<sup>32</sup> And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with [Paul]. <sup>33</sup> When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. <sup>34</sup> On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when [Felix] learned that he was from Cilicia,<sup>81</sup> <sup>35</sup> he said, "I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive."<sup>82</sup> And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium.

By the way, Herod's praetorium was a large palatial dwelling in Caesarea. Paul is imprisoned, but he's imprisoned in style, at least, as he awaits a formal trial. And that's where we'll pick up the narrative next time.

**But go ahead and write this down as a last point from our message:**

4) When a saint is **protected**, God providentially works all things together for good (23:25-35)

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**When a saint is endangered, God providentially works all things together for good. When a saint is protected, God providentially works all things together for good. Providence. Providence. Providence.**

*God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform:  
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.  
Deep in unfathomable mines, with never-failing skill,  
He treasures up His bright designs, and works His sovereign will.  
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread  
are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.  
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace;  
behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.  
His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour:  
the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.*

<sup>79</sup> Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), January 31, 2026. Some geographical points added by author.

<sup>80</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 939: "The town of Antipatris (Αντιπατρις) is mentioned in the Old Testament as Aphek, which was often the basis for Philistine attacks on Israel... The city was re-established by the Roman general Pompey under the name Arethusa, and refounded by Herod I in 9 BC as Antipatris in honor of his father Antipater."

<sup>81</sup> Mohler, *Acts 13-28 for You*, 143: "Why does Felix care about Paul's province? Because the closer you get to Rome, the closer you get to Caesar, and the closer you get to Caesar, the more complicated the political situation is likely to be."

<sup>82</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 683: "To try the case in the locale of the crime is known as the *forum delicti* ... *forum domicilii* is to try the case in the accused's hometown province."

*Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.*<sup>83</sup>

Paul was not in the hands of sinners in Acts 23—Romans or Jews. It might have looked like that. But that's not the case. Paul was in the hands of Almighty God. **As are we. And the mighty hand of providence guides and guards us all the way to the end of our lives and on into eternity.**

*Deep in unfathomable mines, with never-failing skill,  
He treasures up His bright designs, and works His sovereign will.*

**R. Kent Hughes** tells the story about a missionary named **V. Raymond Edman** who in 1926 fell ill from Typhus Fever in the mountains of Ecuador. He was so ill that they despaired of his life and actually ordered a coffin for his body. The doctor said his feet had already turned cold. He was sure to be dead soon. So his wife made preparations for the funeral. She didn't have a black dress for the funeral so she dyed her wedding dress black. They set the date for the funeral. July 4<sup>th</sup> at 3pm, 1926. The funeral for V. Raymond Edman.

Well forty-one years later in 1967, Dr. V. Raymond Edman, the fourth president of Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, was addressing the student body in the school chapel when at 10:53am, he suddenly stopped speaking and collapse to his death and immediately went into the presence of the King of kings. Dr. Edman whose funeral was scheduled for July 4, 1926, instead experienced another forty-one years of faithful service to the Lord, before dying suddenly. Why? Here's the answer that Hughes gives, "God's servants are immortal until their work is done. No servant of God dies a premature death."<sup>84</sup>

**Now hear me on this, church. I know two things about every one of you right now. These two facts are irrefutable. The first fact is that you're alive this morning. God has given you life! The second fact is that everyone here will eventually die. You'll either die or you will be raptured when Christ returns, whichever comes first. But soon enough your time here on planet earth will cease.**

**And in-between those two realities: life and death (this life and the life ever-after)... the Bible says that** "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6).

**For those of you who know Jesus Christ as your Savior... Everything in your life... every good thing, every bad thing, every joyful thing, every difficult thing, every pleasurable thing, every painful thing... God is using all of that for your good... For the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.**

**And I don't have any other instruction for you today, other than just to rest in that. I don't have any other application for you... other than this... Just trust him. Trust in the providence of God!**

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace;  
behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.*

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<sup>83</sup> William Cowper "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," 1774.

<sup>84</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 36:

MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC,