

Acts 22:30-23:22 with John 15: 18-25 The plot to kill Paul thickens... 17th Aug 2025

Prayer: Lord we thank you for your word, guide us this morning by your Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to hear and to put our trust in you. In Jesus name. Amen.

If the world hates you, remember it hated me first...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

When Paul became a follower of Jesus, he knew he would be persecuted. After all he had been a major persecutor himself before meeting Jesus on the way to Damascus! And I'm sure he would have heard from the other disciples of Jesus' warnings about persecution, and the Holy Spirit had warned Paul in his own heart that hardships would come...but this was not going to stop him proclaiming Jesus.

In Acts 20: 22-24 as he prepares to leave Ephesus, Paul says:

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

There are similarities with Jesus final journey to Jerusalem here. Jesus was warned not to go, but he was compelled to, even though he knew that he was to suffer and die there. All this was fulfilling God's purposes and for his glory.

Paul was also compelled to continue his journey, and he knew imprisonment awaited him, but he trusted the Lord's calling and like Jesus, was obedient. So, he continued. His journey, however, was not to end in Jerusalem...he was to continue to spread the good news all the way to Rome.

But let's back up a minute as we look at what's been going on since we left Paul in Athens in chapter 17 last week. We have skipped several chapters, but I hope you've been reading the whole book at home. Paul left Athens and he spends 18 mths in Corinth (where Timothy and Silas finally catch up with him), not all of Paul's visits are short as he plants churches. In Corinth he meets Priscilla and Aquila whom he works with in preaching the gospel and in the tent making business. He then travels around various places again, staying 2 years in Ephesus. During this time Luke says he argued every day in the lecture hall there! What did he preach so consistently? Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets all pointing to Jesus as the Messiah. Healings and the casting out of demons were the norm, people even brought their handkerchiefs and tea towels for him touch and take on healing power.

Of course he got in to trouble again, this time with a silversmith who made and sold statues of the goddess Artemis and his business was losing money as people turned away from idols to

the one true God. There was a big uproar and we see Paul heading off to Troas. While there he is preaching to a crowd one night, when one young fellow, Eutychus sitting in the 3rd story window falls to sleep and falls to his death. Paul prays for him and he recovers, Paul then carries on preaching until dawn!! (He had possibly just written his letter to the Romans and was expounding on that) You have no excuse to complain about the length of my sermons!

Paul is keen to go to Jerusalem, despite warnings that trouble awaits him, warnings just like Jesus had. So we come near to our reading this morning when Paul has arrived in Jerusalem. Paul had purified himself before he went to the temple in Jerusalem, but there were those who had it in for him. They had heard about his teaching about Jesus and they thought Paul was encouraging people to disobey the law and disregard the temple. They beat him up and again with echoes of Jesus story, they shout out ‘away with him, kill him, kill him, kill him!’. The Roman guards intervene and save him. They take him back to the barracks and are about to flog and interrogate him as to what all the fuss is about, when Paul pulls out his trump card announcing that he is a Roman Citizen. At this news they are alarmed, Paul had certain protective rights to a fair trial as a Roman citizen.

The next morning he is released and the commander orders the chief priests and Sanhedrin to assemble so he could learn what they were accusing Paul of. Paul begins to speak saying his conscience is clear regarding his duty to God. It is hard to understand why Paul’s remarks invoked the High Priest to have Paul struck on the mouth. I guess this is following on from his testimony the day before where he had spoken of his journey to faith in the one true God to believing that Jesus was the Messiah the Prophets had spoken of and then told of his calling to the Gentiles. For him to say that was all part of his duty to God was seen as blasphemy, the Sanhedrin certainly did not share this belief that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

But while we may not understand why he was struck at this point; we may be shocked at Paul’s response at being struck on the mouth...*God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!*

At this point Paul is looking a little less like Jesus in Jerusalem! For Jesus answered much more coolly when he was struck on the face and stood quietly as he was mocked and flogged. Jesus had said we were to turn the other cheek and in his letter to the Corinthians chapter 4 we read Paul himself saying...*When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly...*

So, what happened to Paul in this moment? I think maybe we just see a glimpse of the humanity of Paul. He probably lost his temper, for in the next minute we see something of an apology when he was challenged with...*How dare you insult God’s High Priest!* Paul knows the

law well and says he didn't realize it was the High Priest; *for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'*

Various theologians have tried to explain this interaction with Paul where he claims he did not know it was the High Priest. Theologian John Stott suggests that in Paul's letters he alludes to the fact that he suffered with bad eyesight and therefore perhaps he didn't recognize him.

Paul then goes on to deliberately stir up conflict between the Pharisees and the Sadducees around the issue of the resurrection and again we can wonder at his motives here. What we do know is that it caused such a violent dispute with Paul in the centre that the Roman commander had to step in again to rescue Paul from being torn to pieces!

He was locked up again in the Roman barracks and the next night the Lord comes to him with words of assurance...*Take Courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.'*

But in the very next verse we read that some Jews have formed a conspiracy against Paul, even taking an oath not to eat and drink until they had killed him! (they didn't manage to kill him so they should have starved to death, but no doubt they found a legal loophole to get out of their oath!)

This book of Acts really does begin to read like a suspense novel and would make a great movie. The plotting, the whispering, the oaths...and then the hope of the plot being foiled...Paul's nephew just happening to overhear the plans of conspiracy and him running off to tell Paul, then Paul calling the Centurion to take his nephew to the Commander. And all this happening against the ticking clock...will he get to the Commander before the petition from the Sanhedrin, will the Commander listen to this young boy...will Paul get out of Jerusalem alive??!!

Da, da da...Tune in next week.

Fortunately, we don't have to wait, we know what happens. The Commander listens to the young man and dismisses him with the warning not to tell anyone that he has reported this...and he then takes action to assure Paul's safety.

You can go home and read the next section yourself...but I won't leave you wondering. The Commander immediately orders a detachment of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen to escort Paul safely to Governor Felix...all in the cover of darkness...9pm that night!! That's a lot of protection for one man!

Aside from the Lord appearing to Paul the previous night there is no mention of God as this plot is revealed and safety measures are put in place, but His divine hand or fingerprints are all over this.

We may ask who is Paul's nephew? We've never heard of his family members before...had his family become believers? How did the nephew have access to Paul?

But however it happened God obviously placed his young nephew there as part of the plan to save Paul.

And what of the Roman Commander? God used him also.

The unmasking of this plot is a silent witness to God's providential ruling and overruling in the affairs of humankind to fulfil his saving purposes. This scenario reminds me of the book of Esther where God is not mentioned at all and yet we can see him at work, putting his people in the right place at the right time that ended in saving the Jewish people from being wiped out in Persia at that time.

As you continue to read Acts to the end, you will see God's continued providence as Paul eventually safely arrives in Rome. It is not an easy journey...make sure you read about the shipwreck and snake, but Paul never doubts that he will make it because the Lord assured him that he was to spread the good news in Rome. Paul had faith in the promises of Jesus. He knew that his Lord was with him all the way. This faith gave him strength, confidence, peace and courage.

How about us? Maybe we don't have visions of Jesus coming to stand beside us, but we do have his Holy Spirit dwelling in us and experience his presence with us and we have his word in the bible, assuring us that he will never leave nor forsake us.

A young person I know well was sharing with me just this last week how her and her husband held a prayer and fasting day to pray over their future. They believe that through the Holy Spirit her husband was prompted to consider returning to study for a new career direction. They will continue to discern and speak and pray with wise Christian mentors. But the young woman began to feel anxious as to what the change might mean for them. She can see that in a couple of years' time all will be well and God could use them and provide for them in this new career; but in the meantime they might suffer financially, may have to move house etc. And this was causing her anxiety. If it is God's word, then we need to trust and not be afraid.

I pray that when we feel a little overwhelmed, when we are afraid of circumstances that seem beyond our control, when people seem to be plotting against us, that we remember that our Lord is strong and good and he loves us, is with us and rules overall. And he will use us and others to ensure that his name is proclaimed both here and to the nations.

As we sang this morning, we do not need fear the enemy, Jesus has conquered them all.

*Be strong and courageous, The Lord of the Ages
Holds all His little ones safe by His side*

Let's pray: God thank you that you are the God who saves, who watches over us, who is with us in times of persecution or uncertainty. May we trust that you are working your purposes out. May we not be afraid. Be with all who suffer for proclaiming your name, stand beside them giving them strength and courage. In the powerful name of Jesus. Amen.