

Derek French:

Paul's troubles are not over. Having been arrested in Jerusalem, he faces further difficulties. But wonderfully, God comes to his rescue because he wants Paul to testify to Christ at Rome.

We've the help of Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin again, and Phillippa will begin by reading Acts chapter 22, starting at verse 23, and go through to Acts 23 verse 11. Then Gerard will take us through them.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*"Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him. And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?"*

*When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman." Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.*

*The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them.*

*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. 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?" 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.'" 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! 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."*

*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.*

*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."*

Gerard Chrispin:

The Philippian magistrates made a big mistake. They allowed Paul, a Roman citizen, to be imprisoned without a trial and to be flogged. Their neglect of his being a Roman was punishable by death. Paul learned that there was a time to play his Roman citizenship as a political trump card, but he did not play that card until after he and Silas had been flogged and secured in the prison stocks.

Had he revealed his Roman citizenship earlier, they would have avoided both imprisonment and the flogging. However, as their time in custody resulted in the Philippian jailer and all his household believing in Christ and being baptised, Paul and Silas would regard the decision not to avoid being thrown in prison well-justified.

Paul may well recall that painful time at Philippi as he now uses his Roman citizenship in a different Jerusalem setting to save him from needless injury. Soon he will be en route to Rome under Caesar's authority and protection. Seeing the highly pitched, emotional opposition to Paul by the murderous mob, the commander now has him bound to bring him to the barracks to be examined 'under scourging'.

Jesus suffered Roman scourging. The metal and bone ends to the leather thongs tore away his lashed flesh. Many died under such a scourging. Paul is not afraid to suffer, but he wisely avoids it when he can, as long

as he does not thereby compromise his stance as a follower of Jesus. Paul's skilful rhetorical question is, 'Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?'

Waves of shock and fear shake the commander, through the centurion to whom Paul spoke. He tells his men, 'Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman.' The commander questions Paul to make sure. According to one commentator, he reveals that he might have bribed officials to gain Roman citizenship. Paul is Roman by birth. Paul's examiners fear the death penalty for abusing a Roman citizen in this way, and retreat.

The frightened commander now regrets having bound Paul. That might cost him his life. Paul, bravely, has suffered much for the gospel and recently told the Christians at Caesarea, 'I am really not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' But he does not suffer for suffering's sake. He is right and wise to avoid it when he legitimately can.

The next day, the commander has Paul untied. He commands the chief priests and council to appear with Paul to verify the accusations against this Roman citizen. Earnest and respectful, Paul addresses the council, 'Men and brethren.' He is still a Jew. He rightly claims he has lived in all good conscience before God until this day. For this, Ananias the high priest has him struck on the mouth – strange in a judicial tribunal. Paul highlights Ananias' hypocrisy in pretending to judge by the law while breaking it by ordering an illegal assault. He calls him, 'a whitewashed wall', much as Jesus likened the hypocritical Pharisees to whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward but are, within, full of dead men's bones and of all uncleanness.

Paul, unaware of speaking evil of God's high priest, quotes Exodus 22 verse 28 to confirm he is unintentionally wrong. Paul is a former Pharisee and he was probably a council member. The Pharisees and Sadducees are opposed to each other on questions of the supernatural, angels, spirits, miracles and ritual, but especially on the resurrection from the dead. Paul sees his opportunity to escape the council's anti-Christian clutches by prising apart these two factions. Divide and conquer works for Paul too.

Paul knows Jesus died on a cross and rose again. The Pharisees accept resurrection as a theological concept, though few of them dare to believe that the one who died at Calvary arose and is alive for evermore. But they are known as those who believe in resurrection. Paul knows a fair hearing from the council is impossible, especially under cruel Ananias. He makes his move. 'I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. Concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged.' This also will remind the Roman commander that this Roman citizen has broken no Roman law.

Paul's plan works. Pharisees support him in case a spirit or an angel has spoken to him about the resurrection, in which they believe in principle. They do not want to oppose Paul and thereby risk a fight against God. The battle rages between the two factions. The commander fears, lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them. Again, he commands his troops to go and forcibly rescue Paul from them, to take him to the safety of the nearby Antonia barracks. A mob of out of control religious sinners is just as bad as one made up of irreligious sinners. Religion saves no one. It never has. Only personal repentance and faith in Christ crucified, risen again and alive for evermore can save a sinner.

Paul owes his life and prospect of reaching Rome to a god-given blend of very different ingredients. No wonder that, in writing to the Romans, Paul says, 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are killed all day long. We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us, for I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Each Christian today needs to remember that the way can be hard when we follow Jesus. Yet when we come to him, day by day, Jesus bears us up, lifts our burdens and pulls the plough with us. Paul now finds again that this is so true.

The following night, when the adrenaline has stopped coursing through his veins and he is alone, the Lord stood by him. God speaks by name to his battered servant, 'Be of good cheer, Paul.' He promises Paul that he will testify in Rome, as he has in Jerusalem.

Paul's God is our God. He is the gracious God of personal encouragement and help. He gives grace to help in time of need. If you know him as your heavenly father, the Lord Jesus as your lord and saviour and the Holy Spirit as your helper and comforter, there is more good news for you. You will also find that, through him, you can meet the most difficult challenges you encounter in serving him and witnessing for him in a hostile world. You will also experience his joy to strengthen you in your weakness.