

Derek French:

We come today to consider Acts 23 from verse 12 onwards. In it we discover that Paul's life was in great danger from his enemies. But as so often happens, those enemies forgot to include God in their scheming, and that's always a big mistake.

Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin are with us again and Phillippa will read from [verse]12 and then Gerard will explain it for us.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'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."*

*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?" 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."*

*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."*

*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. 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. 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.'*

Gerard Chrispin:

We now meet forty Jewish conspirators who bind themselves under an oath. They bind themselves to eat or drink nothing until they have slain Paul. They share their wicked desire with the chief priests and Jewish elders, and ask them and the council to join them in this evil conspiracy to murder. They want their co-conspirators to persuade the commander to summon Paul to Jerusalem the next day. They must make him think that they are continuing the 'Paul inquiry'. In reality they plan to kill Paul as he approaches Jerusalem.

Again we see that being religious, even being influential religious leaders, never changes anyone's heart. Even if murderers, conspirators and wicked prominent people are religious, they still need to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus to be forgiven.

We will now see how the ambush plan of the very hungry intended assassins of Paul is foiled. On a human level Paul's sister's son, a Roman centurion and, once again, a Roman commander are responsible for rescuing Paul from serious violence. From a divine perspective, Paul himself knows what Jesus Christ promised him during his dramatic encounter with his lord and saviour on the road to Damascus. Jesus assured him, 'I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles to whom I now send you.'

For those who trust Christ, God is able to accomplish his perfect will directly and miraculously as well as through life's normal happenings. He also uses ordinary men and women, who happen to be there, in order to help and protect his people and do them good. Here, an attentive young boy, who obviously likes his uncle Paul, hears about the ambush plan and enters the barracks to tell him. Paul is only held in protective custody so his nephew is allowed to visit him. Relatives of those in custody often bring food for them. This young lad's coming to the barracks is hardly threatening to Rome's soldiers. Roman citizen Paul calls over a centurion and, almost like a military commander himself, instructs him to take his nephew to the commander.

The way the commander talks to the lad suggests he may be a dad or an uncle himself. Taking him by the hand, he asks him one-on-one, 'What have you to tell me?' The lad tells all he knows. The commander lets the lad leave and adds his own command, 'Tell no one about any of this.'

This commander is not about to lose this Roman citizen under his charge to some marauding religious fanatics. Two centurions, two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen should be enough to deter these forty 'hot-heads'!

At 9.00pm ('the third hour of the night') they will leave for the imperial headquarters at Caesarea, sixty miles away, to see the Roman governor, Felix. The commander ensures Paul's safe and sound arrival there. Paul is safe under the protection of the world's best army, and even safer in the almightily strong arms of his living God. Paul has heard before and now experiences that, 'The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms; He will thrust out the enemy from before you.'

The Roman commander's name is Claudius Lysias, as stated in his explanatory letter, 'To the most excellent governor, Felix'. After offering the governor 'Greetings', he selectively reports how Paul comes to be in his custody. In fact he tells Felix that Paul has done nothing to deserve 'death or chains'. He presents himself as the protector of a Roman citizen abroad, who foiled Jewish violence against him, and commanded Paul's accusers to present their charges against Paul before Felix. He has told the truth and nothing but the truth, but he certainly has not told the whole truth. But Felix will have a good idea of the situation from the commander's short letter.

Antipatris is a town built for Antipater, the father of Herod the Great, by his son. Between thirty and forty miles to the north west of Jerusalem, this Roman military post offers the soldiers some rest about two thirds of the way to Caesarea from Jerusalem. The next day the soldiers march back to their Jerusalem barracks while the horsemen continue with Paul to Caesarea. There, Claudius Lysias' letter is delivered to Governor Felix. The apostle Paul is presented to him.

Felix seems to be a 'hands on' governor. He immediately reads the commander's letter and asks Paul which Roman province he is from. Paul tells him he is from Cilicia: this province is to the north and west of adjoining Syria and has Tarsus, Paul's birthplace, as its main port.

Felix deals wisely and fairly. He will wait until the arrival in Caesarea of the 'other side' on this dispute, namely Paul's Jewish accusers, before he questions Paul. He gives orders for Paul to be kept in Herod's Praetorium. This is Herod's headquarters and Felix's official residence. It is far safer for Paul here than in Jerusalem. Paul may have no idea of what to expect as he waits for the Jewish chief priest, Ananias, to arrive to malign him in Caesarea, aided by his lawyer, Tertullus, and the party of dishonest, murderous and determined enemies claiming to be witnesses of accusations they know to be false.

Uncertainty can cause great stress and worry. It can take a Christian's eyes from looking to the Lord, just when he especially needs to trust him. Yet later, when wrongfully imprisoned in Rome, where he now longs to be, Paul will write to the Philippian Christians: 'I have learned in whatever state I am to be content. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.'

There is no self-pity here. No surrender to circumstances. No hesitation in trusting and rejoicing in Christ. No let-up in his desire to see people blessed through trusting Jesus and through sharing the gospel. Paul twice says 'I have learned'. These things cannot be yours without learning from them by walking with Jesus and putting your confidence in him for all he has for you, both suffering and service and both giving and receiving.

How do you use your time on your own? How long do you give to prayer, to studying his word, to reading good Christian books, to listening to good audio sermons, to writing to others and to witnessing if the chance comes?

Paul will now have five days to rest, to read God's word, to pray, to collect his thoughts, to write, to think about how he can make Christ known, and no doubt to speak about his saviour to anyone he can get to listen.

And as events unroll, he is getting nearer to Rome. He knows that God is in control.

He is content.

Derek French:

What's so helpful about what happened to Paul is that, even in the middle of the most trying of circumstances, the Lord still had his hand on Paul and protected him. His enemies were frustrated because God's plan was to bring Paul to Rome.

Paul's God is our God too, and he will keep us in his care, whatever others may try to do.