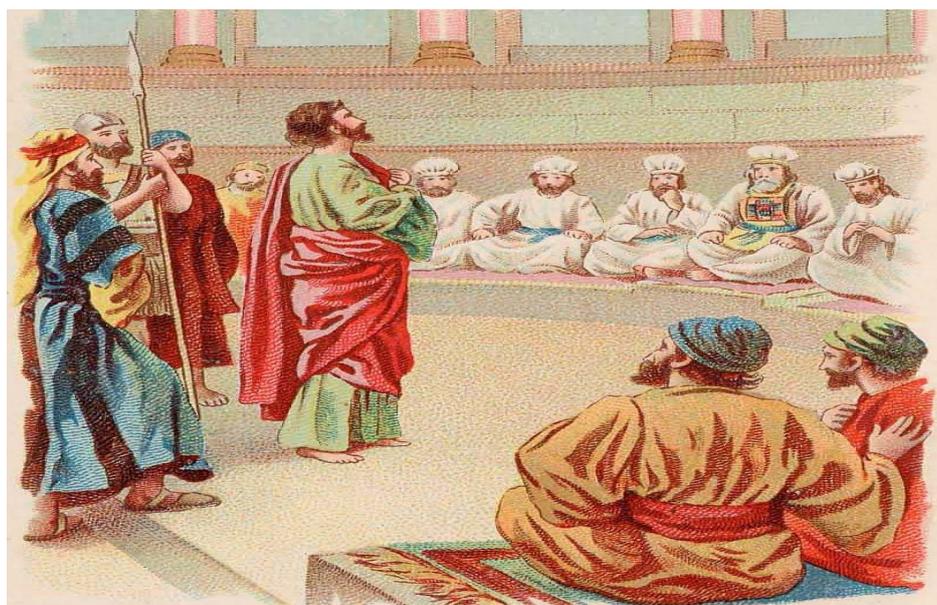


### “STANDING BEFORE YOUR ENEMIES” (Acts 23:1-35)

This chapter is one extended illustration of the doctrine of the providence of God in the entire New Testament. We see here all kinds of interwoven circumstances as God orchestrates and governs events to work His will. From a human standpoint, all of these events may seem like a comedy of errors for Paul’s ministry but God will use it to get Paul the opportunity to preach the gospel to the most powerful leaders of Israel and the Roman Empire. Another benefit will be that Paul will get a time to rest from his incessant labour and pen four Prison Epistles that guide us today.



*And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. (v1)*

Paul is now placed in front of the leaders of Judaism at the Sanhedrin, the high court of Israel. Paul is now brought to face the men that have a deep hatred of Jesus Christ and Christians. These men had heard the gospel on a number of occasions and the charges against Paul are virtually the same as those against Stephen. There are also parallels with Christ as MacArthur comments, “Paul knew the fellowship of the sufferings of Jesus like no man that ever lived. He almost went through the same sequence of events that Jesus did.”

Paul is polite and seeks to point out that he is a fellow orthodox Jew, “*Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.*” Our lives should back up our words (Acts 24:16; 1 Cor. 4:4), but a legalistic Jew would always be fearing that his sins were not covered since his latest sacrifice made for his sins. That is why the high priest would have had a difficult time coming to any sense of a clean conscience. He would reacted in anger now.

*And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth. Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law? (v2-3)*

Coming after he was beaten and sore from the violence of the mob, this blow must have been particularly painful. This expression “*thou whited wall*” was a proverbial term for hypocrisy and Paul used it because the high priest had violated the law. Christ had also called them this (Matt. 23:27). If this was Ananias, Josephus tells us that he was known for infamy and was killed 6 years after this incident so this could have been a prophecy by Paul.



*And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest? Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people. (v4-5)*

Paul had a magnanimous spirit. He cites Exodus 22:28 to demonstrate his allegiance to the letter of the Law and this serves to show up the disregard of Ananias for the law. It could be that because of time Paul did not know most of these men anymore or he may have failed to identify Ananias because of his poor eyesight (Gal. 4:15). Others say that he could be saying that Ananias was not acting according to the duty of a true High Priest.

*But when Paul perceived that the 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: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both. And there arose a great cry: and the scribes that were of the Pharisees' part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God. (v6-9)*

Providentially Paul was a Pharisee and the son of one. He knew their mindsets and divisions intimately and wisely utilised this. It seems he grasped the fact that there is no chance of a fair trial, so Paul was probably trying to use his background to establish a common ground with the Pharisees who were the majority. Without mentioning the name of Jesus Christ, Paul simply affirms his belief in the resurrection. For those who believed in the resurrection of the dead would also be more open to acknowledging the possibility of what Paul claimed. This is exactly what happened for the Pharisees argued, “*We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God.*”

*And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them, and to bring him into the castle. And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome. (v10 -11)*

The hatred for Paul boiled over to the point that many wanted to murder him. The reaction of the leaders of Judaism no doubt confirmed the wisdom and foresight of the Lord to him previously (Acts 22:18, 21). Providence now intervened to deliver Paul once again, *“the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them.”*

Peter slept in his crisis but here we see Paul encountering the Lord Himself at this crisis hour. Paul had just been through three riots and may well have feared that this was the end of his life. No doubt the devil tempted him that neither God nor the church cared for him now, whereas the whole Jewish world was against him. However, God told him:

- (1) *“Be of good cheer, Paul”* – word for the present
- (2) *“as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem”* – this word for the past proves Paul was in the will of God in going to Jerusalem.
- (3) *“thou bear witness also at Rome”* – a future word – every man is immortal until he has done the work God requires of him. It would be two years from the time of the promise to the time that he gets to Rome. No man could stop God’s Will here.

This was the fourth time that the Lord had appeared to Paul (Acts 9:4-6 & 22:14; 22:17-18; 18:9-10). Much of what the Lord told Paul was not anything new, but was a foundation to assure him that what he was told awaited him would happen. He was commended for the past, given comfort for the present, and assurance for the future. God is not distant, passive, or disinterested with the daily events and fears in our lives but works through providence, while still allowing us to make responsible choices. As Harry Ironside commented on this incident, “God is never closer to his people than when they cannot see his face.”

*And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy. And they came to the chief priests and elders, and said, We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul. Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain that he bring him down unto you to morrow, as though ye would enquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him. (v12-15)*

This was a terrible oath by these supposedly spiritual people! These murderous men believed the end justified the means. Ironically, they accuse Paul of transgressing the law. The devil went to a lot of trouble to kill Paul here. More than 40 men were willing to effectively commit suicide to murder this little preacher. Often the devil’s crowd will invoke God’s name in their actions and words whilst seeking to overthrow the will of God. Though this plan seemed foolproof, providence would use this conspiracy to provide a safe departure out of Jerusalem. It also reveals the reputation of the Sanhedrin was publicly known to be so corrupted that they dared to bring this unlawful act before them.

*And when Paul’s sister’s son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul. (v16)*

This is yet another illustration of the doctrine of God’s providence, for it is amazing that this boy just happened to overhear. God uses the smallest, most insignificant things to accomplish His

purposes. No evil person or act can change or thwart God's sovereign will for Paul. Steve Cole notes,

“God also governs human affairs. He determines the time, existence, and boundaries of the nations (Acts 17:26). He sets up rulers and takes them down again (Dan. 4:34-35; Ps. 22:28). He governs every aspect of our lives (Jer. 10:23; Prov. 16:9; 20:24), including the number of days that we will live (Ps. 139:16). He is even sovereign over evil, although He is not tainted in any way by it nor is He responsible for it (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; 1 John 1:5). But He uses evil men and events to carry out His sovereign plan, even as He is doing in our story with this evil plot to kill Paul.”

*Then Paul called one of the centurions unto him, and said, Bring this young man unto the chief captain: for he hath a certain thing to tell him. So he took him, and brought him to the chief captain, and said, Paul the prisoner called me unto him, and prayed me to bring this young man unto thee, who hath something to say unto thee. (v17-18)*

While we believe God works sovereignly through providence, this does not mean we are to neglect human responsibility by adopting a passive or indifferent approach to the leading of providence in our lives. Paul certainly acted upon the information as he knew that God ordains both the end and the means to fulfill the end. (2 Tim. 2:10).



*Then the chief captain took him by the hand, and went with him aside privately, and asked him, What is that thou hast to tell me? And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul to morrow into the council, as though they would enquire somewhat of him more perfectly. But do not thou yield unto them: for there lie in wait for him of them more than forty men, which have bound themselves with an oath, that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him: and now are they ready, looking for a promise from thee. (v19-21)*

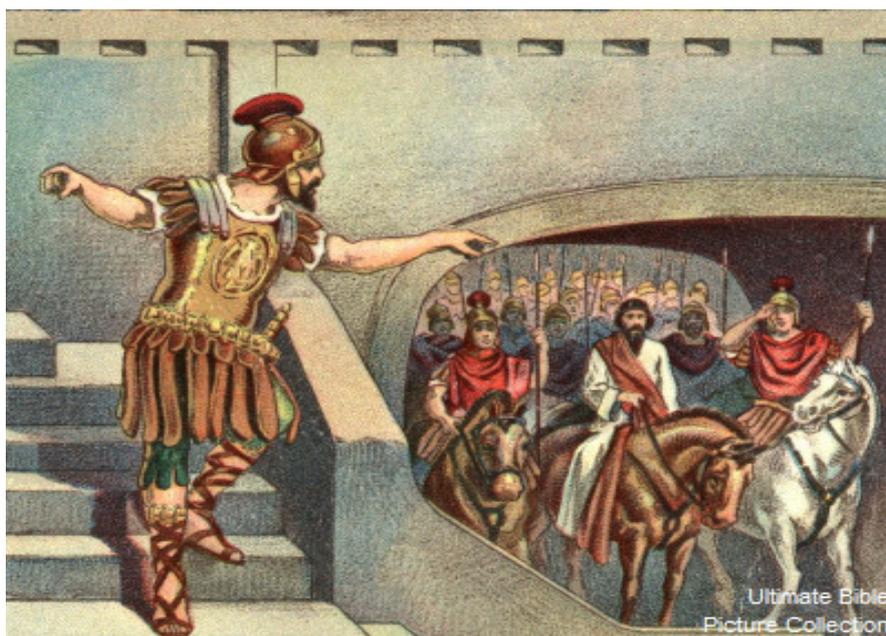
The captain acted in an honourable and gracious way here. Paul's nephew was a wise and courageous young man, "But do not thou yield unto them." This was a powerful statement to a Roman soldier by such a young lad.

*So the chief captain then let the young man depart, and charged him, See thou tell no man that thou hast shewed these things to me. And he called unto him two centurions, saying, Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred, at the third hour of the night; And provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor. (v22-24)*

This silence was needed to prevent these plotters revising their plans if they knew the first one was known. The Lord providentially now provided Paul with the bodyguards of a King (Isa. 54:17). The Gentile Luke contrasts well the action of this Gentile soldier with the leaders of Judaism. A pagan soldier has more respect for natural justice than the Jews.

*And he wrote a letter after this manner: Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sendeth greeting. This man was taken of the Jews, and should have been killed of them: then came I with an army, and rescued him, having understood that he was a Roman. And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council: Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds. And when it was told me how that the Jews laid wait for the man, I sent straightway to thee, and gave commandment to his accusers also to say before thee what they had against him. Farewell. (v26-30)*

Like a clever politician, Lysias covered up his failure by pretending that he knew Paul was a Roman citizen when he initially rescued him thereby presenting the writer in the best light. He was, doubtless, glad to get rid of this problem because it could have cost him his life or career with the Romans or the Jews. The Holy Spirit keeps reminding us of Paul's innocence of these attempts to silence him, "Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds."



*Then the soldiers, as it was commanded them, took Paul, and brought him by night to Antipatris. On the morrow they left the horsemen to go with him, and returned to the castle: Who, when they came to Caesarea and delivered the epistle to the governor, presented Paul also before him. And when the governor had read the letter, he asked of what province he was. And when he understood that he was of Cilicia; I will hear thee, said he, when thine accusers are also come. And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's judgment hall. (v31-35)*

This is the third time Paul left a city secretly at night. Antipatris was a city about half way (about 35- 40 miles) to Caesarea. To achieve this distance in one night they must have moved with considerable haste. Caesarea was the ideal location as it was a Gentile-dominated town and the Jews could not ambush Paul so easily there as they did in Jerusalem.



God is faithful to His promises to preserve Paul and he is now away from immediate danger and closer to Rome. He would face yet more trials now. Although his latter years would be filled with these trials, yet he would accomplish much for the Lord. The pressure was not relieved, but the worker was supported and strengthened by grace! Arnold points out,

“This trial before the Sanhedrin served two purposes. First, it was the means God used in His providential care of Paul to get him officially arrested by the Romans and taken ultimately to Rome. Second, this was God's last major appeal to the Jews to turn to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The Jews rejected Christ. They rejected the message of Stephen about Christ. They rejected the teaching of the Apostles in Jerusalem. Now, what would they do with Paul and his message about Christ? This was God's final appeal for the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to receive Christ as Savior and Lord. Jerusalem was weighed in the balances and found wanting. They had denied the Lord, Stephen, the Apostles and now they denied Paul. The theocracy would be judged and Israel destroyed in 70 A.D. because these stiff-necked Jews refused to come to Jesus Christ, the Messiah.”