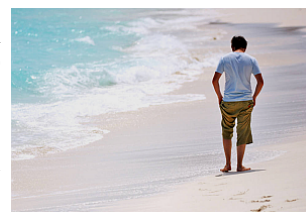


I. Introduction

Good morning! Last week, we saw how the Sanhedrin, the high Jewish council, was thrown into disarray when Paul focused their attention on the resurrection. The Pharisees believed the Old Testament promises of resurrection, but the Sadducees did not. The divided council became violent and the Roman commander had to take Paul back to the barracks in the Antonia Fortress to protect him. Paul, at this point, was not in control of his own fate. To an observer, it would have appeared that Paul's fate rested in the hands of the Sanhedrin and the Roman commander. But the reality is that Paul's fate was in the Hands of God, not the hands of men.



Once, in a conversation with an earnest young Japanese man, I asked him what had made him decide to follow Jesus. He told me that **Proverbs 16:9** changed his life. **“In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.”** We all make plans and we often think that we decide things for ourselves. But when we acknowledge that the Lord is sovereign over all things, our life begins to change.



In today's Scripture, we will see how the Jews and the Romans made plans for what to do about Paul. But I think we will also see the invisible Hand of God arranging all things. Everyone makes plans. But the Lord decides. Let's read with Acts 23:12-22 and see what happens next.

II. Scripture Reading (Acts 23:12-22, NIV, 1984)

12 The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. 13 More than forty men were involved in this plot. 14 They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. 15 Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here." 16 But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. 17 Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him."

18 So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you." 19 The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?" 20 He said: "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. 21 Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request." 22 The commander dismissed the young man and cautioned him, "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me."

III. Teaching

Forty men took an oath that they would not eat or drink until they had killed Paul. But Paul's nephew heard about the plot and he told Paul. And, at Paul's urging, he also reported the plot to the Roman commander. We are not sure why Paul's nephew was in Jerusalem, or how he heard about the conspiracy. But we know that when Paul was a boy he went to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, a famous rabbi and a member of the Sanhedrin. So it is quite possible that Paul's nephew was also studying under a prominent rabbi in Jerusalem and in a position to hear rumors. But in any case, the forty plotters and the seventy members of the Sanhedrin knew about the plot; and a secret know to more than a hundred people rarely remains a secret for long.



Paul will be rescued from the plotters and he will go to Rome and testify of the Lord's resurrection; the Lord had already decided this announced it to Paul. But then, what happened to the forty men who took an oath saying they would not eat or drink until they killed Paul? Did they die of thirst? The Bible doesn't reveal their fate. But scholars of Jewish law tell us that the rabbis of this time had made provisions for people who took rash oaths that could not be kept to be released by confessing their failure and giving offerings at the temple. So these men probably suffered no more than a few days discomfort, followed by the embarrassment of admitting their error, and paying the expenses for an offering. Perhaps their experience even led them to reconsider their hostility to Paul's message of God's love proven through the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Let's consider the hearts of these forty men. These men, no doubt, thought they were serving God by taking an oath to kill Paul. And the Sanhedrin agreed to go along with the plot. But a conspiracy to commit murder is utterly against the heart of God. How could they imagine that this plot would be pleasing to God? Clearly, they were blinded by pride and deceived by their anger. Pride makes us blind and anger is a great deceiver. Around the world, on every day, pride and anger lead people to do terrible things.



We should guard our own hearts against the temptation to speak quickly out of pride or to act in anger. **James 1:19-20** teaches us, **“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”** We all have pride and it is easy to become angry. I personally struggle with pride and anger continually. But even if we think that we have good reason to be angry, we should humble ourselves and remember that anger does not bring righteousness. Pride and anger will not bring us closer to God's heart. If we want to be close to Jesus, we need to choose the way of humility and peace.

It would be easy to think that those who plotted murder were evil men. But what do you think Paul would have said about them? I think Paul already answered that question in **Romans 10:2**, **“For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.”** Paul wrote this before arriving in Jerusalem, but I think it still applies. As Paul made clear on many occasions, before he met Jesus, he also was zealous, but lacked understanding. If those forty men knew Jesus and the love of God that was poured out at the cross, they would probably have acted very differently. But they didn't know Jesus; they did not understand God's heart. We also need to be careful to make sure we do not act out of ignorance. We need to seek to know Jesus and His heart for every circumstance.

Before we go on to the rest of Acts 23, let's take one more look at **Acts 23:16**, **“But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.”** We can imagine the young man running down the streets of Jerusalem, hurrying to warn his uncle Paul of the danger. In verse 19, we are told that the commander took him by the hand – this gives us the image of a very young man, perhaps twelve years old or so. We have to admire the young lad's courage; he would have known that he was endangering himself by telling what he had heard.



This verse also gives us a rare glimpse into the family relationships of Paul. Very little is said about the families of the apostles. But we should remember that they had families just as we do. The apostles had mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters, and most of them had wives and children. Paul alludes to this in **1 Corinthians 9:5** when he says, **“Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?”**

This verse shows that the apostles were family men. Sometimes we forget this. But we should remember the families of the apostles and the sacrifices they made. The apostles and their families were ordinary people. But they were called by the Lord to an extraordinary mission. And they answered, even when the price was high. Can we learn to serve the Lord with the same love and devotion?

Let's read Acts 23:23-35

IV. Scripture Reading (Acts 23:23-35, NIV, 1984)

23 Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. 24 Provide mounts for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix." 25 He wrote a letter as follows: 26 Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings. 27 This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. 28 I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. 29 I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. 30 When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him.

31 So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris. 32 The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. 33 When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him. 34 The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, 35 he said, "I will hear your case when your accusers get here." Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.

V. Teaching

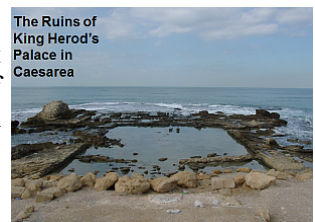
The Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, responded dramatically to the news of the plot against Paul. He sent Paul away that same night with an armed escort of 470 men. This was probably about half of the men the commander had under him. Forty Jews had taken an oath to kill Paul, but the Roman commander ordered ten times that number to guard Paul. The commander made sure that Paul was safe, but he was also protecting himself. If he had allowed the Jews to murder a Roman citizen in his custody, he would have suffered severe punishment for his failure.



200 Soldiers and 200 Spearmen

70 Horsemen

By sending Paul away, the commander also transferred the problem of what to do with Paul to someone else. Paul was sent to Felix, the Roman governor of the province of Judea at that time. At this time, the governor's office was in a building that was originally built as a palace for King Herod the Great. The ruins of the palace foundation are still visible today, on the coast at Caesarea (photo).



The Ruins of King Herod's Palace in Caesarea

The Roman commander sent a letter explaining the situation. **Acts 23:25-27, "He wrote a letter as follows: Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen."** The wording of the letter makes it sound like Claudius rescued Paul because he knew Paul was a citizen. In reality, the commander did not know that Paul was a Roman citizen until after Paul told him, and that was after the commander chained Paul and was about to have him scourged – events that are not mentioned in the letter at all. Claudius modified the story to make his own actions look better.

The commander relates that he took Paul to the Sanhedrin to learn what was going on. And then, in **Acts 23:29**, he writes, **"I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment."** The commander knew that Paul was innocent under Roman law, but he did not release Paul. At the time, this was good, since this kept Paul under the protection of the Roman guards. But from this time forward, Paul will remain in Roman custody for more than five years, even though the Roman commander had already concluded that Paul was innocent.

Acts 23:34-35, "The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, he said, 'I will hear your case when your accusers get here.' Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace." Governor Felix asked where Paul where he was from, perhaps hoping that he could pass this troublesome case on to someone else. But after hearing Paul's answer, he decided that he would hear the case after Paul's accusers came. Meanwhile, Paul was kept under Roman guard, safe from Jewish assassins.

VI. Conclusion

In **2 Samuel 24:14**, “**David said to Gad, ‘I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men.’**” In context, King David is choosing between several different penalties for his sin. But in his cry, we see faith. The Lord’s mercy is great and it is better to place ourselves in His Hands. If we read the whole story in 2 Samuel 24, it is obvious that the Lord held all things in His Hands from beginning to end, even though He gave David a choice. But when we make the choice to trust in Him, God blesses us.

Sometimes it is hard to see God’s love in our circumstances, but He has proven His love in all that He has done, and most especially at the cross of Christ Jesus. The Lord’s promises are trustworthy and true. And He gives special and wonderful promises to those who trust in Him. **Romans 8:28** is a favorite, “**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.**”

Paul appeared to be in great danger because forty men plotted to kill him. It then appeared that Paul was saved by the decisive action of the Roman commander, made possible by the luck of having a nephew who heard of the plot and who had the courage to go and warn Paul and the commander. But when we look closer, we realize that this story is actually a dramatic example of Romans 8:28 in action. Paul’s fate was never in the hands of men. Paul was safe in the Hands of God from the beginning to the end. The Lord worked through the plot of the assassins, the courage of the nephew, and the leadership of the commander to bring Paul closer to his heart’s desire of preaching the Good News in Rome.

The Lord had already promised Paul in **Acts 23:11** that his desire to preach in Rome would become reality. “**The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’**” It is the Lord who ensured Paul’s safety and decided Paul’s future. The Lord says Paul is going to Rome; so Paul is going to Rome.



Wherever we go, whatever we do, we are in God’s Hands, because He is Lord over all. In **Psalm 135:5-6**, the psalmist declares, “**I know that the LORD is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods. The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.**”

The righteous and the wicked alike are in the Hands of God; He is Lord over all. But there are many special promises for those who choose to trust in the Lord for all things. When we make the decision to place ourselves in His Hands and to trust in Him for all things, we have peace with Him. Peace that is made possible by Jesus’ finished work on the cross and resurrection.

Let’s close for today with the promise and admonition of **Isaiah 26:3-4**, “**You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal.**” Let’s pray!

VII. Prayer