

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

Frank E. Allen

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE PAUL BEFORE THE JEWISH COUNCIL (Acts 22:30, 23:1-35)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 11

Review of paragraph.

Loosed - taken before Jewish Council - insulted by high priest - declared himself a Pharisee - Council divided - The Lord stood by him - said, "Be of good cheer" - a plot of more than forty Jews - discovered - Paul sent under guard to Caesarea - kept by Felix in Herod's palace.

1. Earnestness is of prime importance in a messenger of the Gospel (1).
2. The messenger of the Gospel should be ever ready to declare his belief in all the truth of the Bible (6).
3. Intellectual keenness as well as truth is of value to a Christian under trial (6-10).
4. The Lord will comfort and strengthen His people according to their needs (11).
5. The plots of the most cunning men cannot prevail against the plan of God (12-35).

In our last study we left Paul in the castle of Antonia in custody of the Roman captain, Lysias. The next day, the captain, in order that he might learn why Paul was accused of the Jews, released him, and commanded the chief priests and all the council to come together, and brought Paul down and set him before them. As Paul looked earnestly upon the members of the council he declared his innocence. He said: "**Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day**" (Acts 23:1). Ananias, the high priest, commanded those who stood by to strike Paul on the mouth. Paul replied: "**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?**" (Acts 23:3). Some who stood by told Paul that he had reviled the high priest. Then he apologized, saying, he did not know that he was speaking to the high priest. Paul did not say that he had spoken too strongly, but he respected the office and on that account its occupant. The question has been asked, why did not Paul know the high priest? Could he not have distinguished him from others on account of his official robes? Various answers may be given; one of the simplest is that this was a hasty, specially called meeting of the Sanhedrim, a meeting which had been ordered by the Roman captain, and possibly did not meet in the official court room, and before coming to which the high priest probably had not put on his official robes.

THE COUNCIL DIVIDED

Paul saw that the council was made up in part of Sadducees and in part of Pharisees. He had evidence that the high priest was determined to silence and pervert his testimony, and that what he was being subjected to was merely a mock trial, so he determined to try to break up the meeting if he could do so. He would rather trust his future with Romans than with miserable hypocritical Jewish officials. Therefore 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**” (Acts 23:6). This introduced the old subject over which the Pharisees and Sadducees had ever quarreled, namely, whether there are spirits and whether there is to be a resurrection. As a result, the Pharisees stoutly defended him, but the Sadducees wanted to make away with him. He was about to be pulled into pieces when the soldiers came again, rescued him and took him into the castle.

BE OF GOOD CHEER

It is possible that Paul was quite dejected that night, at least Satan was trying to produce in him a spirit of dejection. Human nature has its limitations even in good men. He had tried to give his testimony but it had not been received. Now it seemed impossible to get away from the Jews in Jerusalem. He remembered the prophecy that he was to be taken by the Jews and delivered to the Gentiles. Was he to be held in prison by them indefinitely? Was he ever to be allowed to go on his long desired missionary journey to Rome? While in the midst of such perplexity, and possibly dejection, 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**” (Acts 23:11). How refreshing that blessed message must have been to Paul. It was a source of strength, courage and faith as he passed through other trials in the days and years which were to follow.

A PLOT

There were some of the Jews who were determined to take Paul's life no matter to what extreme of deceit or violence they must resort. More than forty of them banded together and bound themselves under a curse that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. They asked the chief priests and elders to work with them in a plan to carry out their plot. They advised them to ask Paul to come down to see them, as though they wanted to inquire something of him, and they would intercept and kill him on the way. The news of this plot was brought to Paul by his sister's son. Paul sent word to the chief captain asking him to hear the young man's statement.

PROMPT DELIVERANCE

The Roman captain acted promptly and effectively. He ordered that a guard of four hundred foot soldiers and seventy horsemen should be armed and ready to take Paul during the night, on the way to Caesarea, to place him in the charge of Felix the governor of Judaea.

Lysias sent a letter with the soldiers to Felix, telling why Paul was sent, admitting that he had found no fault in him, and saying that he protected him because he understood that he was a Roman. The soldiers took Paul, early that night, out of Jerusalem, and as far as Antipatris on the way to Caesarea. As Paul passed out of the gate of the city and past the place where he had stood with the mob, as they had stoned Stephen to death, he would remember that hour with keen and shameful regret. But he would take heart from the fact that he had suffered and was suffering bitter persecution because he was a zealous preacher of Christ and Him crucified. When they arrived at Antipatris, about thirty-five miles from Jerusalem, past the hill country and dangerous part of the road, the foot soldiers turned back and left the seventy horsemen to take Paul on over the plains to Caesarea.

IN HEROD'S PALACE

When Felix received Paul and the letter from Lysias, he promised that he would give him a hearing when he could arrange for his accusers to be present. He commanded that, until that time, he should be kept in Herod's palace.

EARNESTNESS IN God'S MESSENGERS

Earnestness is of prime importance in a messenger of the Gospel. Paul had been charged with corrupting the temple and opposing the law. He knew that he was speaking to a group of hypocrites, but he hoped that at least some among them might be convinced of his honesty and sincerity. He spoke as earnestly as he could.

Jesus told His disciples that they would be opposed, reviled and persecuted. His followers in every age have to face opponents and hypocrites. Some of these, though bitter opponents, like Saul of Tarsus, will be converted. Not only ministers and missionaries, but every one who calls upon men to believe in Jesus Christ should speak as earnestly as possible. The more earnest the messenger, the better he is as an instrument in the hand of the Spirit, to convince and convert men.

The following was the experience of an evangelist as he told it: "At the close of a powerful work in an eastern city, as I was about to leave (there was a very large congregation in attendance), and at a conference meeting, a lady of fashion arose in the center of the house and with many tears and sobs made a humble confession, that though a professor of religion, she had lived for herself and the world. She still remained standing and sobbing. Finally she was able to request prayers for the conversion of her son. He was present. The learned doctor at my side requested me to urge him to rise for prayer. I did so; but he did not rise. The doctor said, urge more. I entreated him again; but he did not rise. The doctor said to me, urge more. Again I persuaded; and he arose, and was soon rejoicing in hope. About a week after leaving the place, I received a letter, informing me that the lady referred to was dead. Not long after I received another letter, saying that Willie M., her son, was dead. Both died rejoicing in hope. Does any one suppose that I then thought I had urged too much?"

BELIEF IN THE WHOLE TRUTH

The messenger of the Gospel should be ever ready to declare his belief in all the truth of the Bible. Paul declared that he believed in the resurrection, then necessarily in spirits, truths which the Sadducees denied. He said it so plainly and so quickly that he had given his testimony before they could stop him. The Sadducees were the free thinkers, the exponents of the new theology of their day.

The messenger of the Gospel faces some of these skeptics in almost any promiscuous audience today. If he tempers his message to the faith of the crowd it loses most of its strength. In civilized lands he is not likely to be interrupted by a riot as was Paul, but for fear of public or private criticisms he may be frightened into silence. Long ago God commanded His servants: **“Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression”** (Isaiah 58:1). He calls upon His servants thus to warn the people, particularly if they are critical and worldly, that they may repent.

Critics of divine truth become very bold when there is no one who will oppose them with unyielding determination. Their followers frequently become so clamorous that they sound as though there were many more of them than there really are. But when they find that they have been met with courage and without compromise, they frequently slip away ashamed that they have been seen with impious critics.

A missionary with courage, possibly inspired by Paul, was summoned before a magistrate. The following conversation took place. The official said: “We hear that you have been inviting Moslems to become Christians.” The missionary replied: “It is true sir.” The official then asked: “Whom do you invite?” The missionary responded: “I invite you, sir.” He showed the courage of the true missionary who was ready to declare adherence to his principles, even in the face of cruel Moslems. Of like character was that grocer who had taken an active part against the sale of liquor to boys, and as a consequence was visited by a delegation of men who were interested in the sale of liquor. After listening patiently to their threats to destroy his business unless he stopped interfering with theirs, he replied: “You mistake my wares gentlemen, I sell groceries, not principles.”

MENTAL KEENNESS OF VALUE

Intellectual keenness, as well as truth, is of value to a Christian who is under trial. When Paul saw that they had come with intense prejudice in their minds, that even the high priest sought to insult him, he knew that there was no hope of receiving justice, or even of clearing himself before the Roman captain in the presence of that tribunal. He knew also the intense hatred which the Sadducees bore toward the Pharisees. He knew, at one time, as a member of such a persecuting mob, just how they felt toward each other. He decided to divide them and turn their attention away from himself. He declared that he was a Pharisee and that he believed in the resurrection of the dead concerning which he was called in question. This served the purpose of stopping the mock trial and won the Pharisees to his side for the moment. He felt that it would at least prevent him from being condemned by a unanimous decision.

If all of the Jews had remained firmly opposed to him the Roman captain might have left him with them, thinking that to let them dispose of him would be the quickest way out of the trouble. But if a part of them were on Paul's side, and it was known that he was a Roman and likely that some would bring in a complaint to the higher Roman authorities, it would probably be injurious to the Roman captain who was responsible. Therefore Lysias ordered the soldiers to rescue Paul from the opposing factions of Jews and to confine him in the castle, where he would be kept safely until he could decide what disposition to make of him. God is the protector of His people. He protected Paul. He expected him, and he expects us, to use the means within our power to save ourselves. We should use wisdom, energy and courage. God is the hearer and answerer of prayer, but usually He requires the man who prays to work. God promises a harvest in season; we trust Him to fulfill that promise and we pray that we may be given a bountiful harvest. But God expects us to sow and cultivate if we are to reap. **“And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not”** (Galatians 6:9). One has well said: “Effort without prayer is impiety; prayer without effort is mockery. In the union of the two is the highest wisdom.”

Very often men trust in their own wisdom and plans and forget or ignore God. On the other hand, there have been men who think that because they are Christians and innocent of certain charges which have been brought against them, that they are doing their full duty if they make no effort to clear themselves or free themselves from danger. If we can use our intellect or our hands to preserve our lives, that we may be of further service to our Master, surely God intends that we shall use them. Paul may have hoped, by declaring that he was a Pharisee and believed in the resurrection, to win some of the Pharisees to Christ; but it seems to me that he saw that the Pharisees were as great hypocrites as the Sadducees, and, though he longed to win them, his immediate object at this moment was to divide their counsels and make a way for his escape from their cruel and blood-thirsty hands.

COMFORT ACCORDING TO NEED

The Lord will comfort and strengthen His people according to their needs. After Paul had been rescued the second time from the hands of the Jews, by the Roman soldiers, **“Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome”** (Acts 23:11). In many instances in the Bible we have the record of an angel coming to the messengers of God and giving them encouragement. But in very few is it said that the Lord Himself stood beside one of His servants. In this instance the Lord Jesus condescended to return to earth in His own person and stand by the side of Paul, and speak to him words of comfort and assurance. We are not told that Paul was agitated and depressed during the night, but we infer that this was his condition from the fact that the Lord came to comfort him. The greatest trial that could come to Paul was to be shut up without an immediate prospect of going on in his great work. He had endured persecution of all sorts, but in each case he was able to go on and preach in another place. Now that he was kept in the Roman tower he was not privileged to preach and it was usually a slow process to obtain a release. His message had not been heard with favor in Jerusalem, his life had been repeatedly threatened by the Jews, if he were released they would no doubt attack him again. His case seemed desperate, therefore, the Lord brought him a special message of comfort.

Jesus had said, before He went away from this world, **“I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you”** (John 14:18). His promises are always sure. This one is proven here in the life of Paul. God came to Abraham, to Jacob, to Moses, to Joshua, to Gideon, to Elijah, to Elisha, to David, to Isaiah, to Daniel, to Peter, to Paul and to others of His servants who were in special need. Why then need we fear, **“Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me”** (Psalm 27:3).

A Japanese police-officer had two little daughters who were very timid. One evening he wished to have a message delivered to a house a quarter of a mile away. He could not leave to deliver it himself and was much disturbed when he found that there was no one to carry it. He was greatly surprised when, learning of his difficulty, his own timid little girls offered to take it. Thinking it would do them good to conquer their timidity he allowed them to go. They set off fearlessly, hand in hand, and when they returned their father looked at them curiously, and asked: “Were you not afraid?” “Oh no, they replied: at the mission-school the teacher said that God would take care of us wherever we went. We went upstairs and asked Him not to let any one hurt us, then we trusted Him and there was nothing of which to be afraid.” The father decided that a religion which could make his little girls so brave was worth knowing about, and after inquiring about the way, became an earnest Christian. If we are not ready to exercise the faith of a saint like Paul, let us have the trust of a little child, then we will rest assured that God will take care of us.

“The man who once has found abode,
Within the secret place of God
Shall with Almighty God abide,
And in His shadow safely hide.

At thy right hand ten thousand fall,
No harm shall come to thee at all.
Thou with thine eyes shalt only see
What wicked men’s reward shall be.

Thy dwelling place is God Most High,
- For, Lord, Thou art my refuge nigh, -
No evil shall on thee be sent,
Nor any plague come near thy tent.

Because His angels He commands
To bear thee safely in their hands,
To guard thy ways, lest left alone,
Thou dash thy foot against a stone.”

SECRET PLOTS FAIL

The plots of the most cunning cannot prevail against the plan of God. Over forty Jews agreed, under oath, that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.

This record makes clear the fact that there are no secrets hidden from God. However select the group, or however binding the oath may be, all is open and clear in the sight of God. Jesus taught us to live the open life. He said, **“In secret have I done nothing.”** This story before us ought to be a warning to everyone who has bound himself with a curse, or who thinks of so doing, in any society or group of men, whether large or small. It is not necessary to bind ourselves with others under a secret oath to carry out purposes which are good, and men so bound are apt to conceive and carry out purposes which are bad. Many who are bound under secret oaths are sworn to protect their fellow-members under almost all circumstances, whether they have done right or wrong. This is clearly not the Christian standard.

God used a mere lad as His instrument to bring word of the plot against Paul to the captain, and He used the Roman officer to carry out His plan, and to take Paul out of danger and on his way toward Rome, where He had promised that he should go.

When Paul was taken to Caesarea he was kept in Herod’s palace. It had been built by Herod and taken over by the Romans, and now it was used of God to protect and shelter His servant. This seems like a very simple story as we read it. It all seems to have come about in a natural way, but the super-natural God was working out His own plan and overruling it all.

Luke was evidently much with Paul and lived some place in Caesarea, probably with Philip. Shut up at Caesarea, Paul had a period of quiet for about two years. Luke seems to have written the Gospel which bears his name at this time. Paul possibly aided Luke in collecting the materials which Luke tells us he had gathered from eye witnesses and ministers of the Word: **“Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word”** (Luke 1:2). Paul was evidently engaged in writing letters to the churches. Festus declared later: **“Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad”** (Acts 26:24). Dr. G. Campbell Morgan thinks that during this time, Luke, aided by Paul, wrote the epistle to the Hebrews. We may be sure that, confined though he was, the time would not be wasted by Paul.

Some years before this Jesus had said to Peter: **“What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter”** (John 13:7). Very often in our lives our plans seem to be frustrated, and we wonder how we are to be used to serve Christ. At such times we need to remember, that though God’s plan may be veiled from us, we may have perfect confidence that He is directing all to His own name’s glory. A little girl was sitting in a railway train, with apparently no one about. A gentleman sitting behind her leaned forward and began conversation with her. He learned that she was but five, and wonderingly asked, “Why my little girl, aren’t you afraid of riding alone on this car?” Her eyes opened wide at the very thought, and her lips bubbled with laughter. “Oh,” she said, “there can’t nothing hurt me on this train: my papa’s the conductor.” Is not our heavenly FATHER the conductor of all the affairs of this world and shall we have less confidence in Him?

If it were suggested to us that shells fired at a city, for the purpose of capturing it, would be a blessing to that city, we might have our doubts. But during the siege of Sebastopol, a Russian shell buried itself in the side of a hill without the city and opened a spring.

A little fountain bubbled forth where the shell had fallen, and during the remainder of the siege afforded to the thirsty troops, who were stationed in that vicinity, an abundant supply of water. Thus the shot that was intended to bring death and destruction, in the providence of God, proved a messenger of mercy to the parched and weary soldiers within the city. **“The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will”** (Proverbs 21:1). **“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose”** (Romans 8:28).

“Should sevenfold storms of thunder roll,
And shake this globe from pole to pole,
No thunderbolts shall daunt my face,
For Jesus is my Hiding Place.”

QUESTIONS (Acts 22:30, 23:1-35)

1. Where was Paul left in the last lesson?
2. In whose custody?
3. Why did Lysias place Paul before the Jewish Council?
4. How did Ananias insult Paul?
5. What was the result?
6. Why did Paul not know who was high priest?
7. What did Paul recognize as the composition of the Council?
8. How did he cause a division among them?
9. What saved Paul from being torn to pieces?
10. How was Paul comforted the following night?
11. How did a band of Jews plan to kill Paul?
12. How was their plan frustrated?
13. Under whose care was Paul placed at Caesarea?
14. What value has earnestness in the midst of enemies?
15. Why was it dangerous to declare one’s belief in the resurrection in the midst of officers at Jerusalem?
16. How should we imitate Paul in thus declaring the truth?
17. What are we taught here as to the value of faith and effort being exercised together?
18. How may we be sure of the Lord’s comfort in trial?
19. What is the value to men who bind themselves under a secret curse?
20. What does God think of such an organization then or now?

~ end of chapter 39 ~

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