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PAUL'S MIDNIGHT RIDE OUT OF JERUSALEM

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 117
ACTS 23:16-35

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ACTS 23:16-35 "And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told 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. 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 tomorrow 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. 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. 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 worth 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. 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."

We have finally arrived in the study of the life of Paul to what we call "The conspiracy." Forty young zealots had banded themselves together and had taken a vow that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. This conspiracy was really a rebellion against the grace of God. Please remember that this is the devil's world and the devil is always leading a conspiracy against grace. Human viewpoint has a way of setting aside grace and justifying itself. So we are here confronted with forty assassins. They had persuaded themselves that they are helping God through their plot to kill Paul. They actually believed that they were doing righteousness. Quite often the attack upon grace is subtle, but this attack is quite obvious and is out in the open. Grace is constantly under fire, not only in Jerusalem by the Sanhedrin, but throughout the whole earth. To downgrade grace people will play politics, either in a home or in a church or in a convention of churches. Grace has a way of relaxing people and grace keeps people from being pushy and from using political manipulation to gain their own ends. These forty young men are determined they will neither eat nor drink until they have killed Paul. These men would one day be the leaders of their nation until they died in the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. They were self-righteous and headstrong and determined. If you cross people like this they always claim that you are against God. This is the accusation they made against Paul.

On the surface their accusation seemed to be good and legitimate, but from the divine standpoint they are absolutely wrong. The sum and substance of Paul's message was the grace of God. Paul represented the great bastion of grace. His grace principles had been attacked vigorously by the Jerusalem church leadership, and Paul had in a weak moment fallen prey to their attack and had taken a legalistic vow in the temple. But when Paul rebounded from that mistake immediately the Lord took over, and upon the truth of the principle of Romans 8:28 made things work out for God's glory and Paul's good. You see, the Lord can take a nasty incident like this and make it serve his ends. Through this death plot God is going to get Paul back out to the Gentile world again. Because of this death plot Paul will get to Caesarea, and finally will reach Rome, and there he will write four of the greatest books in the Bible. So these attacks upon grace are manifest in the grace principles Paul wrote in the books of Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon.

We are going to try to cover the remainder of this chapter in this study, for the message is quite simple and it is another of those stories which prove that grace is always triumphant. The best way to cover this chapter is to summarize some of the principles we find here. We have already studied the assassination plot in verses 12 and 13.

Seven Points Of Introduction

1. As long as God has a plan for Paul's life no one or nothing can remove him from this life.
2. When the plan of God for Paul's life has been completed, then nothing can keep him on this earth.
3. But God cannot use the Jerusalem church in Paul's deliverance. He used them in the deliverance of Simon Peter back in Acts 12 but the Jerusalem church had deteriorated and in this instance they had no all night prayer for Paul. They had become very antagonistic toward Paul and Paul's message. So for that reason the Jerusalem church was not used of God for Paul's deliverance.
4. God is going to use two people to help Paul--His nephew and the Roman commander. This fact forms the remainder of this chapter. Probably Paul's nephew was a Christian, but the Roman commander was not. The nephew here involved represents God's grace. The Roman commander represents all that was good in the Roman system of law and order. So God used a Christian and a non-Christian to help Paul on his way to Rome.
5. Though Paul is deserted by the Jerusalem church and though he was deeply discouraged, he was directly encouraged by receiving a direct word from the Lord. Now that's what the Bible is to us--a direct word from the Lord. The principle is this--Bible doctrine will carry you when everything else fails.
6. Paul will be sustained therefore by Bible doctrine. Bible truth will sustain him all the way from Jerusalem to Rome.
7. God will frustrate every device of man used against Paul.

Let us look for a moment at one very important verse.

ISAIAH 54:17 "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord."

This verse states a principle. No weapon or tongue can destroy God's servant. This verse really says, "Their righteousness is my problem, sayeth the Lord." So when grace is challenged, the Lord always rises up and defends grace. So here instead of these forty zealots hindering grace, they actually enhance it. In banding together to stop Paul, they actually propelled him into even a closer walk with the Lord and from this experience came Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon. These are the most profitable of all Paul's letters in outlining for us the principles by which we operate under grace in the Church Age. The plot was revealed in verses 16-22.

ACTS 23:16 "And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul." When Paul's nephew heard of this ambush, he went to the barracks and related this plot to Paul.

ACTS 23:17 "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." Immediately Paul had one of the guards to take his nephew to the garrison commander so he would get the information to the top man. In dealings like this, it is always good to go to the top man.

ACTS 23:18 "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." Quite quickly the nephew was before the commander so he could give him his message. Please notice that the centurion did not butt in and try to take over and solve the problem himself. He took the nephew straight to the commander.

ACTS 23:19 "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?" This was a private matter and the officer left it that way.

ACTS 23:20 "And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul tomorrow into the council, as though they would enquire somewhat of him more perfectly." Please notice that this was a matter very carefully reported. The word "desire" should be translated "ask" and the words "inquire something of him more perfectly" should be "inquire something of him more accurately."

ACTS 23:21 "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." This was the advice of the nephew and it is the first time the Roman commander is aware of the details of the assassination plot. So this called for a decision on the part of the Roman commander. He had a great capacity for fairness and was not in the least interested in trying to court favor with the Jews. This is one of the characteristics which made Rome great and made Rome the balance of power in the world for almost 1,000 years. Everything else was secondary to the administration of justice and right. This is the principle upon which this official dealt with Paul. Law and order was their only criterion and we see this principle in operation right here. If this Roman commander had been a crafty, ambitious man, he would probably have turned Paul over to these assassins. But such was not the case. He was a man trained in fairness and justice and this is the principle upon which he operated. God the Holy Spirit gave us this incident to teach us a principle and that principle is this--government is a gift from God to protect us so we can live and let live. Now, to be sure, some governments are not good but that fact does not destroy this principle.

Government is a divine institution to protect and preserve the human race. So this Roman official made his decision in the name of good government and justice. Later on we will encounter some Roman officials who had high authority and they had a lust for money and power and were not just and fair. But such is not the case here.

ACTS 23:22 "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." This commander commanded Paul's nephew to say nothing about this plot for he realized Paul's life was at stake. The human life of a Roman citizen had been threatened and this official was not about to let this thing get out from under his control. We will discover later that these forty assassins never really knew how Paul was removed from Jerusalem. I suppose they are still fasting yet.

ACTS 23:23 "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" Here is the official's decision. Please notice that he used 200 foot soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen. All this was used to protect the life of one Roman citizen. It was a night operation and done in complete safety. The horsemen would escort Paul part of the way past the point of greatest danger, then the foot soldiers would take over and usher him into Caesarea. So Paul came into Jerusalem walking with a few companions, and he left with 470 guarding him. When God puts a wall of protection around his man, he does a good job of it. This is indeed a fantastic escort for just one prisoner.

ACTS 23:24 "And provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor." Paul walked into Jerusalem but he rode out with Roman soldiers all around him. Law and order has to be first written into the laws that guide the nation, then there must be an organization to enforce those laws. Rome had the laws in written form, but they also had the machinery to carry out those written laws. The key word in verse 24 is "safe." In other words, they assumed Paul was innocent until proven guilty. So Rome provided safety for Paul until he could be tried.

Now meet Felix the Governor. He was the brother of Pallas, who was a favorite with the Emperor Claudius. Pallas, Dallas, and Felix were brothers who had once been slaves, and were now free. This Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, was not a Roman citizen born, but had to buy his citizenship. These former slaves, including Felix, made a grab for power once they were placed in official positions. So when Paul fell into the hands of Felix the Governor, he fell into the hands of a first class rat. These slaves destroyed Emperor Claudius and Emperor Nero and almost destroyed the Roman Empire. Felix had been sent to Judaea, and this was about as far from Rome as anyone could go and still be in the empire. But Felix liked the assignment for he knew the Jews had money and he wanted to get his hands on some of it. So in 53 A.D. Felix was a Procurator of the third class province of Judaea.

ACTS 23:25-26 "And he wrote a letter after this manner: Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sendeth greeting." Claudius Lysias wrote a letter to Felix to place before him Paul's case. Please notice he signed the letter at the first. We sign our letters at the last. But they were more logical than we are and put the signature first. It began in this way--"Claudius Lysias--to Excellent Governor Felix, Hello!" This was the salutation to this first class jerk.

ACTS 23:27 "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." The word should be "Would" have been killed by the Jews. Claudius Lysias explained right at the first of the message that Paul was a Roman citizen.

ACTS 23:28 "And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council" This explains the reason why the Roman commander had held the investigation before the Sanhedrin.

ACTS 23:29 "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." Now this was the verdict of this Roman commander. After he had heard the testimony concerning Paul, the commander concluded that Paul had done nothing worthy of death or bonds. "I perceive" is the key word in this verse and explains the fairness of this official. Religion and state should be kept separate and when this Roman official heard the religious debate in the Sanhedrin, he immediately realized that Paul had done nothing worthy of death or bonds. Justice must never get involved in a religious controversy. One of the principles we have learned from this incident is that God has no part in mob violence.

ACTS 23:30 "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." This is an application of the principle of Romans 8:28. Please remember that Felix is a former slave and had no background of Roman justice. But Claudius Lysias represented everything good about Roman law and Felix represented everything bad about Roman law.

ACTS 23:31-32 "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" Here we have the details of the trip. God's mighty protection was about Paul and God ushered him into Caesarea.

ACTS 23:33 "Who, when they came to Caesarea, and delivered the epistle to the governor presented Paul also before him." At last Paul is safely in Caesarea and Roman justice had been used to save his life.

ACTS 23:34 "And when the governor had read the letter, he asked of what province he was. And when he understood that he was of Cilicia;" The reason Felix asked which province he was from was this--he wanted to know if he came from a rich province or a poor one, for Felix the rat was interested in getting some money out of Paul. Felix was not interested in justice--he was interested in bribery. Being from Cilicia, Felix naturally would think Paul was rich, so he would expect from him a big sum.

ACTS 23:35 "I will hear thee, said he, when thine accusers are also come. And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's judgment hall." Herod's judgment hall was the place where important prisoners were kept awaiting trial. Here Felix expected to receive a bribe from Paul.