

Place: Lurgan Baptist 21:2:2012

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

Reading: Acts 22:30-23:35

34. PAUL THE PRISONER

At a time when Martin Luther was in great danger because of the hostility of the Roman Catholic Church toward him, he was traveling to Wittenberg, through the Thuringian Forest, riding in a wagon with friends. A group of masked horsemen attacked his party, and carried him through the forest to the castle of Wartburg. These “*bandits*,” were really Luther’s friends, they disguised him as knight in the castle and kept him in there hiding so his enemies could not destroy him. Is this not exactly what happened the apostle Paul after he was attacked by a Jewish mob in Jerusalem and placed under arrest by the Roman guard ? (22:1) The Romans ruled Palestine in the first century but they left religious affairs to the Jews as long as they were peaceful. Since the Romans did not know how to interpret the charges of the Jews against Paul, they ordered the Sanhedrin, the governing council made up of Pharisees, Sadducees, and the high priest to examine him. So here there is set before us “ **Paul the Prisoner.**” Look at the (23:18)

Now I want you to notice that it refers to Paul, as Paul the prisoner. That’s the first time in the book of Acts you will read this particular terminology. For the first time Paul is

referred in this verse as Paul the prisoner. Now of course we are given the circumstances which brought Paul to be a prisoner. And for the rest of the book of Acts Paul will be in prison, he will not get out of prison, in fact the remainder of these chapters in the book of Acts will take us all the way to the city of Rome where, as a prisoner there, he will have the opportunity to bear witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. (28:30-31) Like John Bunyan who wrote Pilgrim’s Progress while in Bedford jail, Paul wrote four New Testament books, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon during his imprisonment in Rome. And these letters indicate to us how he viewed his imprisonment. For example in (Eph 4:1) Paul refers to himself as “ *the prisoner of the Lord.*” He understood that he was in prison for Christ’s sake. And then in Ephesians (6:20) Paul refers to himself as an “ *ambassador in bonds.*” Now an ambassador is one who is called to represent the king in another land. You see, Paul looked upon those days of imprisonment as being the herald of King Jesus, an ambassador for Jesus Christ in bonds.

Then in Philippians (1:12) he is discussing the circumstances of his imprisonment and he says this, “ *the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.*” Now what he’s saying is that his imprisonment has been an opportunity for the gospel of Jesus Christ to go places where it never previously could have gone. You see, when Paul was in prison in the city of Rome later on, Paul was able to witness to the pretorian guard. That’s that group of Soldier’s who were assigned the responsibility of caring for the emperor himself. So Paul was a witness for Jesus

Christ in those bonds. Paul told the story of Jesus Christ to those Roman soldiers. The result of it was that the gospel was advanced into an area where Paul could never have gone as a free man. And is this not what the Lord does in our lives also ? My God gives us the circumstances which come into our lives as an opportunity to speak a word for the Lord Jesus. Then do you recall what Paul says to young Timothy ? Speaking of the gospel he says, “ *Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds but the Word of God is not bound.* ” (2 Tim 2:9) Now you see Paul understood that though they could put chains on the man but they couldn't put chains on the messenger. They could put him in prison and could hinder his movement but they were not able to hinder the Word of God. I mean, isn't the Word of God wonderful ? The Word of God is able to go forth in unrestricted power. So here in Acts (Ch's 23) Paul's imprisonment begins but he makes it very clear to us that in retrospect, looking back, it was all of God, God was working in the matter, and God used even his imprisonment to be a witness for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now you remember what happened that brought Paul to this place. He had come to the conviction in his heart that it was the will of God for him to go to the city of Jerusalem. His friends begged him not to go. *His friends told him that bonds and affliction awaited him there.* Yet there was the deep conviction in his heart that it was God's plan for him to go to Jerusalem to deliver the money that had been collected by the Gentile churches for the poor saints at Jerusalem. But once in Jerusalem, Paul was not able to do what he had hoped to do. He'd hoped

to have one more opportunity to win his brethren, the Jews, to Christ, but his plans were not able to be carried out. So now, (Ch 23) opens with Paul defending himself before the Sanhedrin. Indeed, the first thing we see here is,

(1) CONFRONTATION: THE PLAN OF GOD

Is it God's plan for us to be in confrontation ? Well, do you recall what the Lord said to Ananias concerning Paul ? “ *For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.* ” (9:16) Now the Sanhedrin was the religious ruling body of the Jews in Roman-occupied Israel. This group was composed of seventy or seventy one of the leading Jewish teachers, with the high priest presiding. Two main religious factions dominated the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sanhedrin's authority was final in matters involving Jewish law, while its authority in civil matters was limited. Roman governors such as Pilate, Felix and Festus and Roman appointed rulers such as the Herod's wielded the political clout in Israel. Now can you see the apostle Paul brought by the Roman commander into the presence of the Jewish Sanhedrin to determine his crime ? Can you see,

(a) THE TESTIMONY FROM PAUL

He says, “ *I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day,* ” it does not mean that all his actions had always been right but it does mean that Paul felt no guilt from anything he had done, for Paul had always been

motivated by a desire to please God. (24:16) Even before he became a Christian he lived with a clear conscience before God, persecuting Christians because he thought it was what God wanted. One Sunday School teacher was discussing conscience and she asked one of her small boys, “ *what is that small voice you always have with you.*” He replied, “ *a transistor radio.*” When one little boy was asked what a conscience was, he thought a minute and then said, “ *something that makes you tell your mother before your sister does.*” Now that’s not a bad definition. In New Testament days’ conscience was not a strange word. Paul uses it twice in the Acts (23:1 24:16) and twenty one times in his letters. It was used by the Greek people in their ever day conversation. It meant “ *the pain you feel when you do wrong.*” Conscience is the inner “ *judge or witness,*” that approves when we do right and disapproves when we do wrong. (Rom 2:15) Now conscience does not set the standard it only applies it. Conscience may compared to a window that lets in the light. Now God’s Law is the light, and the cleaner the window is the more the light shines in.

As the window gets dirty the light gets dimmer, and finally the light becomes darkness. There are at least four distinct consciences mentioned by Paul in the New Testament.

1. A Good or Pure Conscience: (1 Tim 3:9) is one that lets in God’s light so that we are properly convicted if we do wrong and encouraged if we do right.

2. A Defiled Conscience: (1 Cor 8:7) is one that has been sinned against so much that it is no longer sensitive or dependable. If a person continues to sin against his conscience he may up with an

3. An Evil Conscience: (Heb 10:22) or a

4. Seared Conscience: (1 Tim 4:2) Then he would feel convicted if he did what was right rather than was wrong. How could Paul claim to have a “ *good conscience ?*” I mean he persecuted the church and caused innocent people to die. But he had a good conscience for he lived up to the light that he had. My do you want to have a good conscience ? Then you need to expose yourself to the light of God’s Word. You see, Paul’s conscience did not condemn him even though the Jews had. Outraged by Paul’s claim you can see,

(b) THE HOSTILITY TOWARD PAUL:

Look if you will at (23:2) Now this was more than a slap on the face. It’s the same word used in (21:32) to speak of the crowds beating of Paul and of the Roman soldiers beating of Christ. (Matt 27:30) This was of course, illegal and inhumane, for after all, Paul had not been proven guilty of anything. Certainly the high priest would be expected to show honesty and fairness, if not compassion and concern. (Lev 19:15 Heb 5:2) The high priest was Ananias, a man who completely abused his position of power by the way he treated others. Indeed some years later he was actually assassinated by his own

people. You see, it was not out of character for him to act so harshly against Paul but do you see how Paul responds? Look if you will at (21:3) The Jews painted their tombs white, as a warning, because to touch a tomb brought defilement. *Paul was saying that Ananias though he looked okay on the outside was full of decaying filth.* Now did Paul lose control here? Did he lose his temper? Many think that he did. For they tell us when informed of the situation that Paul was quick to apologize, for Moses had written, “ *Thou shalt not speak evil of a ruler of the people.*” (Ex 22:28) *So was Paul speaking these harsh words in the flesh or in the Spirit?* Well, we have no way of knowing for certain. What we do know is this, that Paul did not apologize. Rather he showed respect for the office but not for the man. Now look at this scene. I mean things were not going well for the great apostle. Paul knew that he was not going to get a fair hearing or trial his best hope was to turn his accusers against one another so look at,

(c) *THE STRATEGY OF PAUL:*

As he cries, “ *Men and brethren I am 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*” (23:6-7) Now do you see the ploy Paul was using? He was focusing on the makeup of the Sanhedrin to get the focus off himself? Now remember the Pharisees and the Sadducees were the two factions that dominated the Sanhedrin. And those two factions were socially, politically and theologically at odds with each other. The Pharisees were the conservatives of their day, while the Sadducees were the liberals. The Pharisees believed in

angels, spirits, the resurrection and the supernatural. The Sadducees didn't believe in any of these. It's interesting to notice that the Scripture nowhere records the conversion of a Sadducee but many Pharisees were converted to Christ. (Jn 3:1 15:5) Now Paul knowing the bitter opposition between these two groups exploits it to the fullest. Look if you at (23:9-10) Once again the Romans had to rescue Paul from his own people, who hated him as they hated Christ. Now was Paul “ *playing politics,*” when he took this approach? I don't think so and that for two reasons.

1. Paul realized that he could never get a fair trial before the Sanhedrin:

If the trial had continued he might well have been condemned and taken out and stoned as a blasphemer. The Asian Jews, if given opportunity to testify could have added fuel to the fire with their false witness. No, the wisest to do was to end the hearing as soon as possible and trust God to use the Roman legions to protect Paul from the Jews.

2. Paul was right when he said the real issue was the Resurrection:

Not “ *the resurrection,*” in general but the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. I mean was this not the message that Paul had preached on his missionary journeys? (13:37 17:31) And had he be given the opportunity Paul would have proclaimed to the Sanhedrin the death and resurrection of

Jesus Christ.(24:21 26:6-8 28:20) But do you see his expedience here ? The Lord Jesus said on one occasion, “ *the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.* ” (LK 16:8) But that could not be said of Paul for he turned every situation to the advantage of the cause of Christ. But now before the Sanhedrin there was nearly another riot. And “ *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.* ” Can you see now,

(d) THE DESPONDENCY IN PAUL:

My this was one of the darkest nights in Paul’s life. Pastor Kent Hughes says,

For years he had hoped to give fruitful witness in Jerusalem. But when he arrived he found a compromising church full of legalistic believers who held him suspect because of his contact with the Gentiles. Now his hopes of convincing the leadership of his people had gone up in smoke as well. His dreams of effective testimony to the Jews lay in ashes at his feet, and his vision for successful witness in Rome began to fade too.

My can you see Paul ? Physically, emotionally and spiritually spent. Can you see him in the Fortress of Antonia ? Alone, dejected and dispirited. I wonder, is that where you are this ? Are you facing disappointment,

difficulty and danger ? What would Christ do for Paul in such a valley ? What can Christ do for you ? (1)

(2) CONSOLATION: THE PROVISION OF GOD

For right at Paul’s lowest moment the Lord met him and ministered to his needs. Do you recall what he wrote in one of his prison epistles ? “ *But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.* ” (Phil 4:19) That was not something Paul read in a book. He discovered that truth in the crucible of life when difficulty, danger, and disappointment bombarded him from every direction. My this was one of those occasions.

(a) THE LORD STOOD BY HIM:

Look at (23:11) Was this not the experience of,

1. The Saints of God in the Old Testament:

Do you recall the stand of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego ? Because they would not bow, because they would not budge they were cast into the “ fiery furnace ? ” They were thrown into the furnace, but when the king peered at the fire he saw four figures “ *and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God,* ” (Dan 3:25) Now tell me: are you good at maths ? How many went into the fiery furnace ? Three ? When the king counted them how many did he count in the furnace? Four ? When the king commanded them to come out of the fiery furnace, how many came out ? Three ! Where was the fourth man he saw in the

fire ? ***He was still there !*** That means that when you go through the furnace of fire, the Lord Jesus is already in there waiting for you. He will be right there and He will walk with you though the trial.

2. The Saints of God in the New Testament:

Did you know Paul had experienced this on many occasions, the Lord stood by him ? A few years after his conversion, Paul's life was in danger in Jerusalem, and Christ appeared to him in the temple and told him what to do. (22:17-21) When Paul was discouraged in Corinth and contemplated going elsewhere the Lord said to him, " *Be not afraid but speak and hold not thy peace for I am with thee.*" (18:9) Now when Paul was certainly at a " *low ebb,*" in his ministry Christ appeared once again to encourage him. Paul would later receive encouragement during the storm (27:22-25) and during his trial in Rome. (2 Tim 4:16-17) Truly he proved the truth of the promise, " *Lo I am with you always,*" (Matt 28:20) " *And the Lord stood by him,*" You know,

(a) The Lord Stands by us as the Sympathizing Christ:

The word " *sympathy,*" means to suffer with. Jesus Christ suffers with us in our distress. Paul was in Jerusalem on trial for the faith. Christ understood because He had been in Jerusalem on trial also. Had Paul been beaten, bruised and broken ? So was his Saviour. I mean Jesus understood. My I want to tell you, you have a Savior this who understands and knows what you're going through. I mean " *He can be touched with the*

feeling of our infirmity," (Heb 4:14) He is the sympathizing Jesus.

(b) The Lord Stands by us as the Sustaining Christ:

" *And the Lord stood by him,*" I want to tell you there are some experiences in life when you just can't stand on your own. There are times when you need strength beyond what you are able to produce. When you go into that hospital and you're standing there and there's nothing the doctor can do and friends are not able to help in that circumstance, the Lord Jesus comes and He sustains you. " *And the Lord stood by him,*"

(c) The Lord Stands by us as the Supplying Christ:

" *And the Lord stood by him,*" You see, the Saviour knows your need and is well able to meet it. (a)

(b) THE LORD SPOKE TO HIM:

Look if you at (23:11) Now I don't know how God spoke to Paul. I don't know if it was an audible voice, I don't know if it was a deep impression in his heart, but in a way that Paul could never question, the Lord spoke encouragement to his heart. Will you notice it was,

1. A Word of Courage:

" *Be of good cheer,*" simply means " *take courage.*" How that must have soothed Paul's soul. You see, only Christ

uses this word in the New Testament and in all five instances it brought wonderful comfort.

Christ told a bedridden paralytic to “ *be of good cheer since his sins were forgiven.*” (Matt 9:2)

He told a woman who had suffered with a bleeding for twelve years to “ *be of good cheer,*” since her faith had made her whole. (Matt 9:22)

Christ told the disciples in the midst of a storm on the Sea of Galilee to “ *be of good cheer,*” for He coming to join them in the boat. (Matt 14:27)

He told the disciples on the eve of the crucifixion to “ *be of good cheer,*” for He had overcome the world. (Jn 16:33)

Here He tells Paul to “ *be of good cheer,*” for he must witness of Him at Rome (23:11)

My are you facing sickness ? Are you going through a storm ? Maybe it's the unknown that's filling your heart with fear. Are you wondering how you'll make it ? Listen, the Lord is with you. Take courage He will see you through.

2. A Word of Commendation:

Do you see what the Lord says ? “ *For as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem,*” now isn't that an interesting statement ? I mean the Lord did not rebuke Paul for going

to Jerusalem. He commended him for the witness he had given, even though that witness had not been received. “ *As thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem,*” the Lord no doubt was referring to Paul's courage when he addressed the mob that had just tried to kill him. He was also referring to Paul's testimony before the Sanhedrin although that had not gone well either. Now as far as I can tell, nobody came to Christ as a result of Paul's testimony. Now think about that. And yet the Lord in heaven said to Paul, “ *Paul, you have testified of me in Jerusalem.*”

Now isn't that wonderful to know ? When you witness, the Lord Jesus in heaven notices, He notices. You see, God doesn't require you to be successful just faithful. My making converts is not our job. Our job is to bear witness for the Lord and leave the results to Him. How often we judge our service for the Lord by the results that we can measure or see. How many showed up at the meeting ? How many decisions for Christ ? How many said we did well ? Whereas the main question is, was I faithful to the Word of the Lord ? For the Lord is interested in your faithfulness more than your success.
1, 2,

3. A Word of Confidence:

“ *So must thou bear witness also at Rome,*” (23:11) This had been Paul's desire for months. (19:21 Rom 15:22-29) But events in Jerusalem had made it look as though that desire would not be fulfilled. But the Lord said “ *Paul, you're going to witness for me in Rome.*” Now do you see that word “ *must,*” ? The Greek word

means “ *it is necessary.* ” The Lord uses the same word again when the angel appeared to Paul in the storm before the shipwreck and said, “ *Fear not, Paul, thou must be brought before Caesar,* ” (27:24) My when God says “ *you must,* ” you know it’s a done deal. It’s going to happen. In June 1926 a young missionary in his mid twenties Raymond Edman fell ill from typhus fever in a mountain village in Ecuador. So grave was his illness that he was carried by train and stretcher from Riobamba to Guayaquil the port city of Ecuador. Soon his wife followed. When she arrived at the hospital the North American Doctor told Mrs. Edman that her husband’s feet were already cold, and that he would soon die. A fellow missionary ordered a black, cloth covered coffin for the missionary’s burial.

Because Mrs. Edman had no black dress, she had her wedding dress dyed black. They even set the time and date for the burial 3pm 4th July. Many years later, in 1967, Dr. Raymond Edman, the fourth president of Wheaton College U.S.A. was addressing the student body, when he suddenly collapsed and moments later passed into the presence of His Lord. Dr. Edman had known forty one years of fruitful service since those dark days in Ecuador. Do you know something ? *God’s servants are immortal until their work is done.* You see, the Lord had a job for Paul to do and no-one or no thing could thwart the purposes of God. That’s why this final section in the chapter is all about,

(3) CONSERVATION: THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

Now you see, the Lord’s already said Paul was going to go to Rome, but now read (23:12 -13) Can you see that,

(a) The Plot to Kill Paul was Developed:

Here are over forty men who enter into a death pact together and they say, “ *We’ll not eat a bite, we’ll not take one drink until we have killed Paul.* ” Now the Lord said, “ *Paul, you’re going to Rome,* ” but here’s forty men who say, “ *Paul you are going to die.* ” My violence in the name of religion is still practiced in our world. Bur encouraging to realise that while man proposes the Lord disposes. You see, when God stands by you, it does not matter who may stand you against you. It was Paul who said “ *If God be for us who can be against us ?* ” (Rom 8:31) My we should never be amazed at God’s resources to deliver us. Out of the blue here comes a person we’ve never heard of, so,

(b) The Plot to Kill Paul was Discovered:

There’s a little boy here who happened to be the nephew of Paul, (23:16) and that little boy overheard this plot to kill Paul. That little boy heard the plot, he ran to Paul at prison, told Paul about it, and Paul said to the centurions, “ *Take this boy to the chief captain for he has something to tell him.* ” (23:17) You see, the Lord just took a little boy to take a warning to Paul about the plot against his life and that snippet of information changed the course of the world. Isn’t this how the Lord works ? He just takes small ordinary things to accomplish His purpose. That burning bush by which God spoke to

Moses, that sling in the hand of David, that little boys lunch that fed thousands. *I mean, what would have happened to the gospel, to the growth of the church if this plot to kill Paul had succeeded ?* What will happen if you and I don't respond to the small tasks or opportunities that that God places in our path ? They may seem like small things but God makes a practice of using little things in this world to accomplish His big purposes. So,

(c) The Plot to Kill Paul was Defeated:

Can you picture it ? God arranged for 470 Roman soldiers to protect Paul and bring him to Caesarea in the middle of the night. I mean what a convoy for a preacher. Paul left town on horseback surrounded by 470 soldiers. He left town more like a king than a criminal. Meanwhile, his assassins were left in the city fighting insistent hunger pains. *I mean they might have been the original Weight Watchers.* Now here's an interesting thing. From (23:11) onwards there is no mention of the Lord and yet in the rest of this chapter you see the amazing providence of God in the life of Paul. Let me tell you something, **God is never nearer to you than when His face is unseen.** Did you know that ?

There's a whole book in the Bible that not one time mentions the name of God. Do you know what it is ? It's the book of Esther. You know the story, it is the story of Esther who became the queen. And you remember Haman had determined that he was going to exterminate the Jews, he was the Hitler of the Old Testament. And Mordecai, the uncle of Esther, saw the circumstances. It was a dire

situation. God's name is not mentioned in the entire book of Esther but when you get to the sixth chapter of the book of Esther, in the first verse it says “ *On that night could not the king sleep.* ” (Esther 6:1) He just couldn't go to sleep that night. You see, every time, the old king would doze over the Lord would pinch him. Every time he'd just about go off, the Lord would pinch him. He couldn't go to sleep, so he just got up in the middle of the night like people do who can't go to sleep and he started reading a book. And in that book he read the account of what Mordecai had done to foil a plot against the life of the king, and out of that reading of the book the king took steps to insure that the Jews would be protected and cared for. How did that come about ? My it came about by the wonderful providence of God *and the providence of God is the hand of God in the glove of history.* My when you can't see God in the matter, don't you let that cause you to think God's not in the matter. For “ *standing somewhere in the shadows you'll find Jesus.* ”

Though moment by moment Paul seems to be on the edge of jeopardy, he's really never in danger, nor are we because of the providence and faithfulness of God. Indeed the Bible says, “ *the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him and delivereth them.* ” (Ps 34:7) That does not mean we will never get hurt, but it does mean there will be no mistakes or “ chance,” events. God is in control of all. There's a God in heaven who will stand by you, speak to you, and safeguard you. *Trust Him.*

