



## "REASONS TO REJOICE"

"Your Words were found and I ate them, and Your Word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart." Jeremiah 15:16

### "RIDING THROUGH"

## THE BOOK OF ACTS-LESSON 23

In chapter 21, Paul was falsely accused of teaching contrary to the law and defiling the temple by bringing a Gentile into their holy place (Acts 21:28). In chapter 22, Paul gives his defense before the people, who went crazy and started throwing dirt and tearing their garments (Acts 22:23). Now Paul gets the opportunity to give his defense before the Council of the Sanhedrin.

Luke refers to the Sanhedrin simply as "the council" throughout Acts. This council consisted of 70 men and the high priest. Their job was to write laws, and judge the people according to their interpretation of the Mosaic law. These men held this position for life.

Paul was under "military custody," which meant that he was bound to a Roman soldier who was responsible for him. Some prisoners were put under "public custody," which meant that they were put in a common jail (Acts 16:19-24).

I can't help wondering how Paul was feeling at this time. So far he had been beaten by the mob (Acts 21:27-32), bound in chains, and had almost been scourged. He was most likely exhausted, sore, and hungry. Was he discouraged? Defeated? Was Paul angry? Let's read on ...

### First Day

1. Read Acts 23:1-35. Answer the following questions for each section:
  - a. What does the text say? (list the facts)
  - b. What are the key words or phrases?
  - c. Define any words that you don't understand.
  - d. What is the main point of the section?

### Section I (Verses 1-11)

## Section II (Verses 12-22)

## Section III (Verses 23-35)

2. Read Acts 23:1-11 again. Who are the main characters?

This was at least the fifth time that the Sanhedrin was forced to evaluate the Christian movement. Jesus stood before the council, along with Peter, John, the 12 disciples, Stephen, and now Paul. That council sure had some great opportunities to hear the Gospel, didn't they?

3. What was Paul's opening statement in verse 1? What do you think Paul meant?

Paul implies that he had nothing to be ashamed of in becoming a Christian, and that it was God whom he would answer to. His "conscience" was clear, so to speak. He was certainly not claiming to be sinless, but he was referring to the blamelessness of his conduct as measured by the demands of the law.

Paul uses the word "conscience" twice in the Book of Acts and twenty-one times in all of his writings. The word means "to know with" or "to know together." It's the inner witness that determines if what we do is right, wrong, good, or bad.

Warren Wiersbe has some interesting things to say about our conscience: "Although our conscience approves or disapproves when we do right or wrong, our conscience does not set the standard; it only applies it. The conscience of a thief would bother him if he told the truth about his fellow crooks as much as the Christian's conscience would convict him if he told a lie about his friends. Conscience does not make the standards; it only applies the standards of the person, whether they are good or bad, right or wrong."

We are not to be led by our conscience, but by the Holy Spirit and God's Word. When we allow our conscience to tell us what is right or wrong, we are in danger of deceiving ourselves. God's standard is always the correct standard!

4. Do you ever let your conscience tell you what to do? Do you make statements like, "I feel like this is the right thing to do"? or "I'm going to follow my heart"? Ask God to search your heart on this. Make a commitment to allow God's Word to direct your life.

5. Back to Acts 23; why did Paul's statement make the high priest so mad? What did Ananias do to Paul?

Ananias was the high priest from A.D. 48, for 10 years. Josephus describes Ananias as "a bold man in his temper and very insolent. He was also of the sect of the Sadducees who were very rigid in judging offenders above all the rest of the Jews. He was murdered by Jewish patriots in A.D. 66".

6. How did Paul respond to Ananias after he was smacked? Why did he call him a "whitewashed wall"? Read the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:27-28 for help.

7. How was Paul's trial similar to that of Jesus, in John 18:19-23?

8. When Paul found out whom he had insulted, what did he do?

Paul's outburst is a little puzzling. Many think that he was experiencing righteous anger and that his actions were justified. Others believe that Paul acted on his emotions, and spoke out of turn, thus ruining his opportunity to share the Gospel. Was it spite, or righteous indignation?

Did Paul really not know that Ananias was the high priest? Some suggest that he was being sarcastic, saying that he could certainly not tell by his unlawful actions that he was the high priest. His behavior did not fit his position. Other scholars believe that because it is thought that Paul had some sort of eye disease (Galatians 4:15 and 6:11), he really could not see him very well.

It could be that Paul very simply did not recognize the man. He had never had an encounter with Ananias before. He also had not had contact with the Sanhedrin for at least 20 years. Everett Harrison suggests, "The high priest may not have been wearing his official robes on this occasion, since he was not ministering in the temple and, in view of the fact that the meeting had been called by Claudius Lysias, may not have been presiding."

9. What do you think? Discuss your thoughts.

This ends our lesson for today. Whether or not Paul acted in his flesh is really not the important issue. The issue is knowing what God has for you and me in this chapter. Is He speaking to you?

**Memory Verse of the Week:** " ... Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." Acts 23:1

### Second Day

**Review your memory verse. Can you stand before God in good conscience today?**

Today we will continue looking at Paul's defense before the council.

1. Read Acts 23:1-11.
2. In verse 5, was Paul making an apology? Read Exodus 22:28 to see what law Paul was referring to.

Paul was showing respect for the position of the high priest, not necessarily the man himself. We are called to respect and obey those in authority over us (Romans 13) because of their position, not because of who they are.

3. Explain in more detail why and how we can respect a position, but not necessarily the man. Give some examples.
  
4. Have you been "speaking evil" about those in authority over you? Have you been doing it in front of your children? If so, what do you need to do about it?
  
5. In Acts 23:6-11, how did Paul exercise the gift of wisdom? Explain what happened.
  
6. Why were the Pharisees on Paul's side? (vs 9)
  
7. When dissension arose, what did the commander do? Why? (vs 10)
  
8. The Lord appeared to Paul again in verse 11. How did God encourage him? Why do you think he needed encouraging? What did the Lord confirm? (Acts 19:21)
  
9. In verse 11, notice the phrase, "**the Lord stood by him.**" How does this phrase encourage you? Can you sense His presence? Can you find any Scriptures that remind you of this truth?

10. Paul may have thought that God would be mad at him for failing to share the Gospel. How did the Lord show him an example of His grace?
  
11. Has there ever been a time when you felt guilty about something you did, and God showed you His grace when you expected His discipline? Can you share?

We'll stop here for today. I am rejoicing that God is standing by me. Many times in our lives our friends desert us when we feel they should be there for us. Co-workers may turn against us, family may fail us -- but the Lord will always "stand by" us. Now if that's not a **"Reason to Rejoice,"** nothing is!

### Third Day

#### **What's your memory verse?**

Today we discover a secret plan by some of the Jews. They forgot that God knows everything, and you can't hide anything from Him. God was on Paul's side, so Paul would be protected.

1. Read Acts 23:12-22. Who are the main characters?
  
2. Why were these Jews so determined to kill Paul? How was he a threat to them?
  
3. Describe the Jews' plan.
  
4. Did the council support it?

5. Who overheard their plans? What did he do?

It's amazing to see how God continually protected Paul. In chapter 18, God used their own law, by the decision of Gallio, to protect him from the Jews. Now, God uses an eavesdropper to deliver Paul. Charles Swindoll points out some interesting things about this deliverance:

1. The otherwise unknown nephew "just happens" to overhear the plot.
2. He somehow entered the heavily-guarded barracks to tell Paul.
3. A centurion was willing to take him to the commander.
4. The busy commander listened to him right away, and believed him.
5. Then the commander ordered a small army to escort Paul out of town under cover of darkness.

Number 4 and 5 we will read about in tomorrow's lesson. But from this story, we can see how God keeps His promises, no matter what. He uses people, circumstances, and at times, divine intervention to keep His Word.

6. Think of one story in the Bible, Old or New Testament. Give the Scripture reference, and write the things God used to accomplish His will and keep His promise. For example, the story of Joseph (*Genesis 37-50*). God had plans for Joseph to be Pharaoh's ruler over Egypt. God used the circumstances in his life to bring about His will. He was sold by his brothers, put in prison, forgotten there, etc. God showed Joseph in a dream that his family would bow down to him, and they did.

7. Think of an example in your life when God has used very "ordinary" circumstances to speak to you, protect you, or keep His promise to you. Looking back now, how can you see that He did work "all things together for good"?

8. God protects His kids. What does He protect us from? Read the following verses for some answers:

- a. 2 Thessalonians 3:3
- b. Psalm 91:3-7
- c. Psalm 57:1
- d. Jude 24
- e. 1 Corinthians 10:13

9. Will God protect us if we are out of His will? Explain your answer.
10. Has anyone ever "plotted" against you? How did God deliver you?
11. Read Proverbs 10:9. How is this a comfort to you?
12. The wicked plot, scheme, devise, and deceive. Read Proverbs 4:23-27. What verbs describe what a righteous man does?
13. Which verbs describe you and your life? Are you plotting any evil right now? Are you deceiving someone? Repent today and ask God to help you become a woman who is "keeping her heart."

That's it for today. Tomorrow we will read about Paul's exciting escape! What a life he led! Did he ever do anything normal? (What is normal, anyway?) Following Christ should always be an exciting adventure!

#### **Fourth Day**

**Review your memory verse.**

The plot to kill Paul was heard by his nephew. Who is this boy? We don't know anything about him. Whether the sister and this son lived in Jerusalem, or were just



visiting, or whether the boy was studying there as Paul had done before him must remain unanswered questions. Many scholars assume that Paul's family disowned him when he became a Christian, but we don't know for sure. We do know that when Paul fled from the plot in Jerusalem after his conversion, he did go home to Tarsus (Acts 9:30). Paul also referred to his "kinsmen" who were "in Christ before me" (Romans 16:7), which can be interpreted to mean relatives (Jerusalem to Rome, Homer Kent). Fun to think about, isn't it?

1. Read about Paul's rescue in Acts 23:23-35.
2. Describe the plan to rescue Paul.
  
3. Why was the commander so concerned about Paul's safety? Why didn't he just let the Jews attack him?

This plan was to take place at the third hour of the night, or 9 p.m. The word "**spearman**" in verse 23 is otherwise unknown in this period, but it is thought to mean "led horses," thus providing for a change of horses. The size of the escort would then be smaller (see verse 32). (New Century Bible Commentary, William Neil) "Mounts" could be either horses or mules.

4. Who were they taking Paul to see?

The governor was the Roman procurator of Judaea. He held his office from A.D. 52 until he was recalled to Rome, probably in A.D. 58. Josephus tells us that "he could commit all kinds of enormities with impunity." It is said that "with all manner of cruelty and lust, he exercised the functions of a prince with the disposition of a slave." His rule in Judaea was marked by fiercely repressive measures, and his eventual recall to Rome arose from charges of unnecessarily massacring his rebellious subjects.

Paul was being taken to Caesarea, a distance of about 65 miles. They "foot marched" about 37 miles to Antiparis. The foot soldiers then returned to Jerusalem, and the horsemen led Paul the rest of the way, which was about 28 miles.

5. Claudius Lysias sent a letter to Felix along with Paul. Read the letter in verses 26-30. How does he address Felix?
6. How many times in this letter does Claudius use the word "I"? Who seems like the hero in his version?
7. Was everything he said true? Did he "stretch the truth" in any part?
8. When they delivered him to Felix, what did the governor do? Where did he put Paul?
9. Why didn't Felix hear Paul's case right away?

Paul was put in "**Herod's Praetorium**," which was a palace that was built for Herod, but was being used as the Roman governor's house.

10. Why do you think Paul was receiving such special treatment?

This concludes our lesson for today. All these events that God used to get Paul to Rome are simply amazing.

**Where has the Lord told you to go?** Next door to share the Lord? To the kid's school, as an example to the teachers? To the lady in the bank, whom you've always wanted to share with? Don't worry, if He's told you to go, you'll get there. I know it.

### Fifth Day

**Write out your memory verse. Again I ask you, have you lived in all good conscience before the Lord this week?**

In today's lesson, we are going to do a little reviewing. This is a very interesting and exciting chapter. What else can we learn?

**Day One:** Paul called the high priest a "whitewashed wall." He was calling him a hypocrite, saying one thing, yet doing another.

- a. Are you guilty of being a "whitewashed wall"? Do you judge others for the very things you do yourself? Are you a hypocrite in any area? Ask the Lord, He'll show you.

**Day Two:** A pagan soldier rescued Paul from the clamor that resulted when the two parties began to fight. He removed him from the fortress for his own safety.

- a. What must the pagan soldier have thought of the Jewish religion after seeing such a thing?
  
- b. Are you in a "squabble" right now with a fellow Christian? What might those around you think of Christianity because of this?
  
- c. The Lord told Paul to "**be of good cheer**" in verse 11. This means to "take courage." What is He telling you to "take courage" about? Remember, He's standing by you! Find another place in Scripture where the Lord told someone to "be of good cheer."

**Day Three:** We can see God's sovereignty through the way He delivered Paul. Only God holds our future in His hands.

- a. Read Isaiah 64:8. What does this tell us about His hands? How important are a potter's hands in fashioning his clay? Who decides what happens to the pot? The potter or the clay? How does this speak to you? Meditate on this analogy in light of this chapter. Are you letting Him fashion and mold you, or are you resisting the Potter?

**Day Four:** Claudius Lysias painted himself in a pretty good light in his letter to Felix. At times, we also portray ourselves as the "hero" in the stories we tell.

- a. When we read Claudius' letter, we are amazed at how many times he says "I". Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how many times you use the word "I" today. How often do we talk about ourselves? **Read 1 Peter 5:6.** As Christians, what are we called to do? (And we thought that Paul had the "eye" problem!)

There are a lot of things that we are reminded of in this chapter: God's sovereignty, His protection, His grace, and His love. Let's end with this quote: **"Lord, help me to remember the things I ought not to forget, and to forget the things I ought not to remember." Remember Him, and Rejoice!**