

God Our Helper

Acts 23

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Acts 23:1, "And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." We're right in the middle of a narrative, so if you haven't been with us on Wednesday night, you need to back up into Acts 22:30. It says, "On the morrow," the next day, "because he," that is, the chief Roman captain, "would have known the certainty wherefore he was accused of the Jews," that is, Paul was accused of the Jews, "he loosed him from his bands," referring to Paul, "and commanded the chief priests and all their council," notice that, "to appear, and brought Paul down, and set him before them."

Paul is in chains in Jerusalem. He fulfilled his lifelong goal and ambition to come to Jerusalem. He brought the offering. He was in the temple taking the vow, and certain Jews actually started a riot. They were beating on Paul. The Romans rescued him. Then, Paul, on the steps of the Fortress of Antonia says, "May I speak to them?" He began to preach and share his testimony. He came down to the word "Gentiles," where God had called him to the Gentiles. When he uttered that one word, "Gentile," the mob went into a rage and started beating him again; so the Roman soldiers ran down and rescued Paul. Now, they're going to have to keep Paul under arrest. Again, he's making arrangements at the end of Acts 22 so that, maybe in a little more civilized manner, Paul can appear before these Jewish authorities and answer for the accusations that they're bringing against him.

I want to outline Acts 23 tonight, if you're taking notes. Paul is going through a dark time. Paul is going through a difficult time. He's been arrested. He's falsely accused. He's in chains. He's going to be shipped (tonight we're going to see) to Caesarea for two years, and by ship, on a Roman ship as a prisoner, he's going to be sent to Rome and spend some time there in prison and in chains. But God came to Paul and encouraged him, and I want to point out four things that God did for Paul or four things that were happening in Paul's life that helped or encouraged or strengthened him through this difficult time that Paul was facing. I believe that they all apply to us as well.

The first thing I note as Paul was going to face all this trial and all these difficulties and troubles, Paul had a clear conscience. That's number one. Paul had a clear conscience. If you're going to be able to handle the reverses of life, the difficulties of life, the hardships that may come into your life or the dark days, you need to have a conscience that is clear before God.

So, "Paul, earnestly beholding the council," now the council is a reference to the Jewish supreme court which is known as the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin were made up of 70 Jewish elders. They were actually their own authority. They had their authority over the Jewish nation, and they were the Jews high supreme court. This is the same group that, interestingly enough, Peter and John were brought before in Acts 4. It's the same group that the apostles were brought before in Acts 5, the same group that Stephen was brought before in Acts 6, and the same group that Jesus Christ stood before and was condemned by. So, these guys have had a

long history of these Christians, Christ Himself, and now it's Paul's turn to stand before these Sanhedrin. The word "Sanhedrin," by the way, means seventy; and that's how many there were in this supreme court for the Jews. There were 70 of them.

Paul makes this statement, where I get my first point, "I have lived..." as he opens his mouth and begins to give his defense before the Sanhedrin, "in all good conscience before God until this day. 2 And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him," Paul, "to smite him on the mouth. 3 Then said Paul unto him, 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? 4 And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest? 5 Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written," and he's quoting from Exodus 22:28, "Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people."

We have the beginning of this trial before the Sanhedrin. The first words out of Paul's mouth, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." Now, some Bible students kind of wonder about that statement out of Paul's mouth. They think, Was not Paul, earlier Saul, who persecuted the church and killed Christians, how could you possibly have Paul saying, 'I've lived in all good conscience until this day,' when obviously he was a hater, a murderer, and a killer of Christians? He consented even unto Stephen's death. Here's my answer. I don't know if it's right or not, but here's my answer, along with a lot of other Bible student's answer. I think it's a good one. Even though Paul was persecuting Christians, he actually believed he was doing God's work. He believed with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind that he was doing God's work; and he actually said that. He said, "I persecuted the church. I thought I was doing a service for God." So, it is possible to be doing something wrong and to have what you think is the right motive and your conscience not bother you. Now, here's a point that we need to understand. It is true that we can let our conscience be our guide, but sometimes our conscience is not the best guide. It can be lied to. It can be seared. It can be wrong. It can be educated in a wrong way. What I mean by that, a conscience is only as good as the light that it receives, and your conscience must be subject to the black and white objective truth of God's Word.

There are some people that can do horrible crimes and their conscience doesn't bother them. Does that mean it's okay? No. Even though Jiminy Cricket says, "Let your conscience be your guide," your conscience isn't always the best guide—Pastor Miller quoting Jiminy Cricket tonight. I like to use the illustration of our conscience like a sundial. You know the ancient way to tell time, they had the sundial. The sun would cast its shadow on the sundial and you'd be able to determine what time it is. What good was a sundial in the dark? They didn't have a day-glow sundial, you know. You couldn't push a button to get the time at night. It only worked when the light was shining upon it, and I would suggest to you that that's the same about your conscience. Your conscience only works properly when the light of God's Word is shining on it, and it must be educated by God's Word and submitted to the truth of God's Word. Or, another explanation could be (and I don't know that this is the one that Paul is referring to since his conversion) that since he was converted to that day he had lived in all good conscience before God.

The point I want to make is that when things go wrong in your life, when you're facing reverses and difficulties and hardships, you need to make sure that you have a conscience that is clear before God, you've confessed your sin, you're right with God, that you know what God's Word says, and you are seeking to live by God's Word. Many times when things go wrong we start to think, It's because I've sinned, or I'm out of the will of God, or I've done something wrong, or God is punishing me. We need to make sure that we have a clear conscience before God and can face the difficulties and the trials that we have. In Philippians 3:6, Paul actually said that he had lived blamelessly when he was reciting his spiritual pedigree as a Pharisee. He says, "As touching the law, I was blameless," so he had really lived a devoted life. It's interesting though that you can be devoted to God, your conscience may be unaffected, but it's not educated by the truth of God's Word and you're not getting a proper read.

When Paul said that...Ananias the priest (and we can do a whole study on Ananias, but you do your homework) was one of the most corrupt, worldly wicked priests that Israel ever had. He was a materialist. He was a Sadducee, and he was in power. He robbed from other priests to kind of pad his own lifestyle. During the Jewish revolt, he was actually killed by the Jews themselves because they hated and despised him so much. Ananias thought, The audacity of this man that we are sure is guilty of sin, that he would claim that he had a good conscience, so he ordered someone that was standing down by Paul (maybe he's sitting up in his judge's seat) and said, "Smite him on the mouth," hit him on the face.

Again, Paul had not been found guilty. This was not right. It was out of order. So, Paul responds, and again Bible students have a fun time with this. They kind of debate over whether Paul was in the flesh or angry. I think there is good warrant to say that Paul was actually a little ticked—as ticked as an apostle could get, you know—at this so-called religious leader smiting him in the face when he had really done nothing wrong. Paul answered back, possibly in anger, we can't really be sure about that, and said, "God shall smite thee, thou whited wall." That expression could be the same one Jesus used when He talked about the religious leaders that they were whitewashed sepulchers—they looked beautiful on the outside but were full of dead men's bones. There is also an obscure reference to a whited wall of the hypocrisy of the Jews in the book of Ezekiel. No doubt, this was kind of a real insult at the time, and when someone heard Paul say that they were just completely freaked out. They said, "Revilest thou God's high priest?" How dare you do that!

Here's the interesting thing, again. Paul says, "I'm sorry. I didn't know that it was the high priest because it is written in God's Word," and he quotes, as I said, Exodus 22:28, "Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people." If Paul was in the flesh and responded in anger, immediately he said, "Sorry, I didn't know. Please forgive me. I didn't realize he was the high priest." (Again, Bible students, and we're going to get going here in just a minute. Don't freak out. You think, John's going to be going two hours tonight. He hasn't even gotten through these first five verses.) Another interesting question. When Paul says, "I did not know that it was the high priest," the question is why? People think Paul, at one time was Saul, was believed to be a member of the Sanhedrin, that he was a part of what was going on there in Jerusalem. Paul would've known who the high priest is. He would've known what's happening.

One theory is that this was kind of a quick informal gathering of the Sanhedrin, and Ananias the high priest wasn't sitting in his normal chair or wearing his normal garment and he couldn't tell. Another theory is the most popular, that Paul's eyes were bad and he was kind of squinting saying, "I'm sorry. Sorry. I couldn't see that well," you know. They didn't have eyeglasses in those days. The lighting was difficult, and we do know that when Paul wrote to the Galatians he said, "Ye see how large a letter," not length of letter but how large my font is—the letters that I'm writing unto you—which indicated that Paul had bad eyes, and another reference where Paul says that if it were possible, you would've plucked out your eyes and given them to me. So, it seems somewhat clear that Paul possibly had bad eyes or poor eyesight. It could've been that Paul didn't recognize who it was that was ordering him to be smacked in the mouth, and he just said, "God will smack you, you whited wall!" Then, he got rebuked and says, "Oh, sorry. I couldn't really see back there," you know, "I just...my eyes are so bad."

Here's another theory. The other theory is that he could see and he knew and meant it, and when he heard that someone rebuked him he answered in sarcasm—I like this theory. Go for it, Paul—that Paul was sarcastic and was actually driving home the irony of it, "Sorry, I didn't know that anyone that would be such a rat could be the high priest." That's what he was actually saying. He was actually saying sarcastically, "Ah! Sorry. I didn't think anyone that had done such a horrible thing could be the high priest, and I surely shouldn't speak against him because God's Word says, 'Thou shalt not speak evil of a ruler of thy people.'" Anyway, I think we pretty thoroughly covered those verses. When you're going through a difficult time, make sure, like Paul, that you have a clear conscience.

Here's the second point when you're going through times of difficulties, Paul had the hope of the resurrection. When all of life is going crazy around you, you stand on that hope of the resurrection, verses 6-10. Let's read it. "But when Paul perceived," as he's looking at the council, "that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, 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." Paul not only said, "I have a clear conscience," but "I have hope, and my hope is in the resurrection of the dead." Verse 7, "And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided. 8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both. 9 And there arose a great cry: and the scribes that were of the Pharisees' part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God. 10 And when there arose a great dissension, 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." It just keeps erupting, and they're grabbing and tearing at Paul and so forth.

Now, again, this is an interesting story. Paul's standing before the Sanhedrin, and I believe that God gave him this little insightful kind of trick or way to create a dissension. Now, there are some Bible students that criticize Paul again, and they think that he is resorting to kind of political tactics and he's causing division and so forth and, Why would he resort to that? Why didn't he just trust God? I believe that, you know, God wants us to trust Him but use our brains

as well, right? If you see an opportunity to do something to help, you take advantage of that. You don't just bypass it, "Oh, I'm just going to trust God." He says, "Hmmm, half of the Sanhedrin are Sadducees and half of them are Pharisees."

Now, here's what you need to understand. These are two sects of the Jewish religion: Sadducees and Pharisees. In the gospels we hear a lot about the Pharisees, and in the book of Acts, we hear a little more about the "Sad you sees." I believe that they're "Sad you see" because (it's my little theory) they didn't believe in the hope of the resurrection. If you don't believe in the resurrection or life beyond the grave you're "Sad you see," and so they called them Sadducees. I'm kidding. Some of you go, "Wow! That's deep! That's awesome!" I'm kidding, but I'm not kidding. They didn't believe in the resurrection but they were religious, and they were the ones that were the priests. They were the ones that were the leaders of the Jewish religion. The Pharisees were more orthodox. They believe in life after death. They believed in the resurrection from the dead. The Sadducees didn't believe in angels or spirits. They just thought you die and you're gone. There's no life after death, so they were materialists.

It's interesting that we have liberals today that claim to be Christian but don't believe in life after death or the resurrection of the dead. They don't believe in anything the Bible teaches—the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, His sinless nature, His being divine and God, His substitutionary death, His bodily resurrection. They deny all those essential doctrines, and liberalism is not dead. It is still with us today. It just puts on different clothes.

Paul seeing this difference realizes, You know, I'm a Pharisee. He was actually realizing that, you know, I believe that Jesus died and rose again, and that's what I preach. It was broader though than just the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was the whole idea that there's the spiritual behind the material, there's the real world behind the physical world. All that's seen, the Bible says, is temporal; all that is not seen is eternal. We live in a culture and a world today that is materialistic—they don't believe in God or life after death—and because of that, when they go through difficulties they don't have hope. I believe that the greatest hope that we can build our lives upon is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Amen? That is what makes life worth living! Had Jesus died on the cross and been buried and not risen from the dead, then we wouldn't be forgiven of our sins. In this world we would be miserable—there's no life beyond the grave; there's no hope that we will ever be reunited with our loved ones.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, "...we are of all men most miserable." And he says, "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept...afterward they that are Christ's at his coming." So, all of life has purpose and meaning because Jesus lives and He rose from the dead. Without that, there is no hope. Watch Christians go through hardships and darkness and hang onto that hope of everlasting life. I have a son-in-law, my oldest daughter is married to, that has had his father in the hospital on life support. Today, they got word that there's no brain waves and they had to make that painful decision to let him go. Tomorrow they're going to be...today the relatives were coming in—the family, my grandkids are quite upset, my daughter and son-in-law. It was unexpected. So, I sent a text to my son-in-law, Clint, today. I quoted John 11 where Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth

in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” He sent me back a text, “Amen and amen!” What a blessed hope that is. When we bury people we love—a mother or a father or a grandfather, people that we care about—we know that because Jesus rose from the dead that there’s purpose and there’s meaning. Even tonight, when we celebrate this Lord’s supper, remember the hope of that resurrection.

The story moves on to our third area that Jesus came to Paul and encouraged him. This is my favorite (just one verse, verse 11), that is, the comfort of His presence and of His promise. Notice verse 11. “And the night following the Lord stood by him,” that is, Paul, “and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome,” one verse packed with precious truths. First, we have a clear conscience when we’re going through dark and difficult times. Secondly, we have the hope of the resurrection. Thirdly, we have the comfort of His presence and of His promise. When God is with us, when we have the promises of His Word, we don’t need to fret and we don’t need to fear and we don’t need to worry.

There are several times in the book of Acts when God appeared to Paul. In Corinth, when he was discouraged and was seeing very little fruit in his ministry God came to him in Acts 18 and said, “Don’t be afraid, Paul, for I have many people in this city. Keep preaching the gospel.” Then, we’re going to see in a couple of weeks in Acts 27, when Paul is on the ship and being sent in chains to Rome as a prisoner, they encounter a storm and all think they’re going to die. They were really just at their wit’s end. The Lord came to Paul on that ship, again, and said, “Don’t be afraid. No one will die. I’m with you, and you will see Rome.” Now, here’s the third episode in Acts 23:11 where the Lord comes that night and stood by him.

I want you to notice these five things—first, God’s presence. The Lord stood by him. Isn’t that precious? Do you know that God stands with you even when you don’t sense His presence? If you’re in chains and all is dark, you’re being falsely accused and attacked, you don’t know what’s going on, and everything seems to be thrown into turmoil, Jesus said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” You can take that promise to the bank. It’s good, and I thank God that no matter what I’m going through that God is with me. Psalm 23:4, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” and, by the way, in the Hebrew that’s the valley of deepest darkness. Maybe you’re in that valley right now. There’s no sunshine on your life. “...I will fear no evil,” why? the Psalmist says, “for thou art with me,” amen? “thy rod and thy staff they comfort me,” so we have the presence of God.

Secondly, we have the voice of God speaks to us in our darkest hours. The Lord said unto me, “Be of good cheer.” What do we need when we’re going through a difficult time? We need to remind ourselves God is with us—Emmanuel, God is with us—and that God speaks to us. We need to hear His voice.

Thirdly, Paul had a promise given to him from God. He said, “Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome,” so the promise, “I’m with you,” the promise that, “what you’ve done in Jerusalem has been a witness. You’ve testified of Me,”

which, by the way, I believe supports the point that Paul, in going to Jerusalem, was in the will of God. God didn't rebuke him. Even if he were out of the will of God, God still loved him and took care of him, but God came to him and said, "Look, you have witnessed to Me." Everything has turned into a riot. He's in chains. Nothing seemed to go right according to plan, yet God says, "You did just what I wanted you to do. You're right in the center of my will." That's the promise that God gave to him. And, "As you've witnessed here in Jerusalem, you will bear witness of Me at Rome." Paul had the Lord tell him very clearly, "You're going to go to Rome. You're going to have a future. I have a plan for you." So, he had God's presence. He heard God's voice. He got God's promise, and he was given God's will. When we're in the storm and we're going through a trial, we need to remind ourselves that God has a purpose, that God has a design. It's been said, "He's no idle husbandman. He purposes a crop when He plows up our lives." He's going to grow us. Then there's God's witness. I love that. God says, "You bore witness of Me here in Jerusalem. You will also bear witness of Me in Rome."

This is kind of like the Lord's Word to Paul. It was to His disciples when He said, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel." He told them also in Acts, "...ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." When we don't think we've been a witness, when we think we've failed and think that it hasn't gone the way it should, leave the results in God's hands. God's the One that makes the estimation of what has been effective or not. So, we have God's love and care in times of difficulty for Paul. I love that!

Here's my fourth and last and final point. We'll move through it quickly. This is perhaps one of my favorites in this chapter—the providential care of God. Now the word "providential" or providence is kind of an old English word that we used in early America. We don't use it a lot today. It's not in the Bible, but its truth is; that is, that God cares for us, God watches over us, and God orchestrates the affairs of our lives for our good and for His glory. I believe that with all my heart. There are no accidents with God. God never goes, "Oops!" God never goes, "Wow! I didn't know that." So, what you think might be a reversal, God is in control. Our disappointments are His appointments. God is in control. If you're discouraged tonight, rest assured that God cares and God is in control. We're going to see that in this closing, moving narrative from verses 12-35.

"And when it was day," after the night when the Lord came and spoke encouragement and comfort to Paul, "certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse," or an oath, "saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul." How's that for having problems? The dude's in jail and 40 zealot, radical terrorists take a vow, "We're not going to eat or drink until we have killed Paul the Apostle." Actually, God providentially had him arrested to preserve his life. Verse 13, "And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy." Just a little footnote, lest I forget, as the story goes on, they never did kill Paul—I wonder if they ever ate. I believe that when they finally got really, really hungry, "Awww, forget it," you know, "pass me the mashed potatoes." They finally gave up.

Verse 14, "And they came to the chief priests," they got the spiritual leaders to kind of go along

with this plan, “and elders, and said, We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul. 15 Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain,” the Roman soldier, “that he bring him down,” that is, Paul, “unto you to morrow, as though ye would enquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him.” They had plotted and plans to kill him.

Verse 16, “And when Paul’s sister’s son,” this is an interesting insight, “heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul. 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. 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. 19 Then the chief captain took him by the hand,” he was, evidently, a young boy, “and went with him aside privately, and asked him, What is that thou hast to tell me? 20 And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul to morrow into the council, as though they would enquire somewhat of him more perfectly. 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. 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. 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; 24 And provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor.”

Again, like I said, this is just history; and most people will read these stories and, I understand, they’ll just kind of pass over them. You know, the Bible says that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable, so there’s some lessons to learn as we see God’s providential hand in Paul’s life. We learned something about Paul we didn’t know about any other place in the Bible in that Paul had a sister. In verse 16, his sister had a son, so this was Paul’s nephew. Isn’t it amazing the way God works to take care of His children? I believe before Saul and his sister were ever born, before his mom and dad ever got married, ever had kids, that God actually preordained that he would have a sister, that his sister would have a son, the son would be sent to school, no doubt, in Jerusalem, that his son would hear what is going on, and that God had it all orchestrated so that at this point in this time the son would actually spare the life of Paul. I mean, God could’ve just sent an angel with a flaming sword, you know, like a Star Wars lightsaber or something, “Vzzzzzzz!” to deliver Paul. But no, He works behind the scenes—somebody you meet, somebody you encounter, maybe not even a believer.

We have no way of knowing whether Paul’s sister was a Christian. They evidently were Jewish; and this boy, it’s believed her son, was in Jerusalem like Saul to sit maybe at the feet of Gamaliel or at least to be taught in the Rabbinical schools. They were probably a well-to-do family. Maybe Paul, or at that time Saul, had other siblings or other family members. What about his parents, and did he visit them when he went back to Tarsus? There’s just a lot that remains unanswered in the Bible. This we do know, he had one sister and she had a son. That

son somehow, it doesn't tell us how, got wind of what was going on, and God sent him to warn his Uncle Paul. God opened the door for him to get into the prison and to be able to speak to his uncle. He said, "Uncle Paul, there's about 40 Jews and they took a vow. They're not going to eat or drink until you're dead!" Again, Paul could've said, "Awwww, I trust in God. I believe in God. I know the Lord can take care of me. Thank you, Son, but you know it's going to be okay." No. He says, "Okay. I want you to go to the chief captain and tell him what you told me. Tell him that you have something to share with him." So, he took action on his own. Sometimes God works supernaturally naturally and wants us to put feet onto our own prayers.

The young boy comes and speaks to the chief captain. He tells him what's going on, and notice what God provided for Paul the prisoner. I love it! Verse 23, "And he called unto him two centurions, saying, Make ready two hundred soldiers," so the centurion is over 100 men, two centurions, 200 soldiers, and then he says, "and horsemen threescore and ten," that's 70, "and spearmen two hundred," now that's 470 Roman soldiers armed to the teeth! Isn't God amazing? You have one little chained-up Christian who was a Pharisee, Paul, and the Jews trying to kill him—man's plotting and man's planning—but God is working behind the scene. You know, it doesn't matter who comes against you: If God be for us, who can be against us? Amen? That's what this story is saying: If God be for us, who can be against us? It says, 470 soldiers, all surrounding him; and at nine o'clock at night, they put Paul on a horse and secret him down to the Roman garrison town of Caesarea, notice it in verse 23. "Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea...And provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor."

The governor then, Sergius Paulus is his name, by the way, this is the first time in the story of Acts that we found out who this Roman guy was that saved Paul. His name was Sergius Paulus. In verse 25 it says, "And he wrote a letter after this manner," here's his letter, "Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sendeth greeting. 27 This man," referring to Paul, "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." This Claudius Lysias is trying to make himself look good to Felix the governor. Remember when he rescued Paul, he thought he was an Egyptian that had led off some other people and he didn't really know, and he was going to whip and beat him, but now he's kind of making it look like, "Hey, I rescued this guy. I was doing my job. Everything is cool." "And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council: 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. 30 And when it was told me how that the Jews laid wait for the man, I sent straightway," immediately, "to thee, and gave commandment to his accusers also to say before thee what they had against him. Farewell."

Verse 31, "Then the soldiers, as it was commanded them, took Paul, and brought him by night to Antipatris. 32 On the morrow they left the horsemen to go with him, and returned to the castle: 33 Who, when they came to Caesarea, and delivered the epistle to the governor, presented Paul also before him. 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; 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." He was under arrest in Herod's judgment hall. Paul is for two years in Caesarea along the coast, which is the seat of the Roman government.

Now, let me wrap this up and make application to our lives. When we're passing through times of trial and difficulty and darkness as Paul was in chains, we have to have a clear conscience, we have to build our lives on the hope of the resurrection, we have to rest on His presence and His promises—never doubt in the dark what God has spoken in the light—and lastly, God's providential care. God is working. As a matter of fact, let me say it like this: When you don't see Him, when you can't feel Him, when you don't hear Him, He's working in spite of that. God is in control. God is working, so rest and trust in His providence. God uses small, insignificant things like a nephew or faithful friend or somebody else to help you in your time of need. I think that's pretty cool. God used Moses' rod. God used David's sling and stone. Jesus was born in a humble stable; He died on a cruel cross. God used that in history and the resurrection to bring about man's great salvation. God is with you. God will protect you, and God has a plan for your life.

Now, as you read these closing stories of Acts 23, basically you just say, "You know what? God's in control." God actually told him, "I'm with you." He said, "I'm going to go before you. You witnessed here, you're going to witness in Rome," and when Paul gets on the ship and takes off for Rome, they hit a big storm and think they're all going to die, but God had given him a promise. You might think you're going to die tonight. God's given you a promise that nothing can separate you from the love of God, that there's no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Amen? God is in control of your life. It's a win-win situation; and there's no condemnation, there's no separation, and there's no defeat for those who are in Christ Jesus. Amen? Let's pray.