

# Acts

## Part 57 – “The Plot Against Paul”

### Acts 23:12-35

“The more brightly the light of doctrine shines, so as to press more closely on wicked men, they are driven to a greater pitch of madness.” – John Calvin

Acts 23 is not the first record of Paul facing danger and death. Indeed his life had been in danger many times. Through the actions of those at the center of the plot to assassinate Paul we gain insight into the fearsome satanic struggle against the church’s gospel mission. We are also reminded of the fact that no matter how violently the enemy may oppose God and his people, the gospel will advance. Neither the hypocrisy of the Sanhedrin nor the violence of would-be assassins could silence the gospel.



*Antonius Felix*

God’s purposes are in no danger of being overturned. His cause will prevail. And it will please God to use whatever means he chooses to bring it about. For Paul there was great comfort in knowing that God is sovereign. Indeed, he was immortal until that day God had appointed for him to shake off the perishable. It is impossible for God to act contrary to his character. Our faithful God will never be faithless. Our sovereign God will never fail to direct all things according to his good and wise will.

**Main Idea:** Despite opposition in all its forms the Christian is guarded by the perfect providence of God to be his witness in all circumstances.

**Vs. 14** – That is, they went to those certain to be favorable to their plan. There were, no doubt, some wiser heads or real Christian sympathizers who they would not have included in their plans.

**Vs. 15** – Such a plan, with Paul in Roman custody as he was, was bound to cost many lives, but no one who follows events in today’s Middle East can possibly deny that religious zealots are often are willing to lay down their lives to take the lives of their enemies.

**Vs. 16** – Other than this single reference, we know nothing about Paul’s family or their attitude concerning his conversion and subsequent Christian ministry. His reference in Phil. 3:8 to having "suffered the loss of all things" may well be taken to imply that he had been disinherited by his family, but there may have remained a family affection nonetheless.

**Vs. 19** – The fact that the commander took Paul’s nephew by the hand suggests that he may have been rather young.

**Vs. 20** – Note that the plotters intend Paul’s death "tomorrow." They hadn’t intended to fast very long.

**Vs. 23** – In other words, they were to leave the city under cover of darkness.

**Vs. 26** – Felix was the governor of Judea from A.D. 52-59. He was by no means a great man. Tacitus, the Roman historian, sums up his career in a sentence: "He exercised the power of a king with the mind of a slave." But he was a favorite of the emperors Claudius and Nero. T.R. Glover: "the day would come when we would call our cats Felix, our dogs Nero, and our sons Paul!"

**Vs. 27** – How like human nature. He doesn’t bother to report the fact that he had arrested Paul and had had him scourged before he found out that Paul was a Roman citizen.

**Vs. 29** – It became clear to this commander that the original charge about Paul having instigated a violation of the sanctity of the temple was bogus. No one will press that charge later either when Paul is tried.

**Vs. 34** – The mention of Cilicia is an interesting historical detail. In this period the procedure was developing that permitted an accused man to be sent back to his home province for trial and that would

have let Felix off the hook, though it would have irritated the Jews who would have had to go to Cilicia to present their charges. But at this time Cilicia was not a full province, as it would be just a few years later. It was ruled by the Legate of Syria who would not want to be bothered with minor offenses. Hence Felix had little choice but to keep Paul in Caesarea and try him there. One scholar of Roman legal procedure suggests that a later writer than Luke would scarcely have understood this tricky legal point — once Cilicia was a province it wouldn't have mattered — and would not have known to mention it.

### **1. The fury we can expect from Satan**

Vv. 12-15

- Paul was slandered, beaten, falsely accused, threatened, and nearly assassinated. While, none of this was pleasant for Paul it certainly did not come as any surprise. He knew, at least generally, the sorts of opposition he would face in Jerusalem. Though opposition and violence against the gospel and the people of God are typically carried out by people we must not forget that the origins lie in the guile of Satan. He is the accuser of the God's people (Rev 12:10). He is the thief who comes to "steal, kill, and destroy" (John 10:10). He schemes against God's people (Eph 6:11). He sets a snare for the unwitting (2 Tim 2:26). He is the adversary who seeks to devour (1 Peter 5:8).

### **2. The deceit we can expect from our hearts**

Vv. 12-15

- It would be unwise to avoid identifying in any way with Paul's opponents. Here we see the plot of 40 would-be assassins to kill Paul before he can give any further testimony. But even more shocking is the collusion of at least some members of the Sanhedrin. So great was their hatred and jealousy of Paul that they willingly broke the very law for which they claimed to be zealous.
- How deceitful is the heart of man! How easily we willingly sin in service to what we believe is a just cause.
- In what ways do you justify or overlook your own sin?
- Has hypocrisy taken root in any corner of your life?

### **3. The assurance we can expect from God**

Vv. 16-35

- As we have seen so often in Acts God is often pleased to use seemingly ordinary means (that is, non-miraculous) to accomplish his purposes. Here God used a nephew of Paul to expose the plot of the assassins. Also, once again, God used the Roman military to protect Paul and ensure that his witness to the risen Christ is heard in Rome. This was just according to the words of Jesus — "You will also testify in Rome" (23:11).
- Prison is generally associated with guilt. Paul however continued to be imprisoned despite a three-fold declaration of innocence. His primary concern was not his acquittal. Paul never seemed to pity himself. Rather, Paul was driven by God's mission and he carried on with full confidence that God would preserve him according to His own perfect providence. This period of Roman imprisonment gave Paul the opportunity to proclaim the gospel before high placed officials. It was also during this same period where Paul wrote a portion of the New Testament which bears witness to the Lord Jesus throughout the world today. In all of this we are assured that God can be trusted to exercise wise oversight of his beloved people as they go about advancing the gospel.
- Who directs and guarantees the success of the church's mission?
- What is your hope in the darkest days?