

Acts 23: 23

23 And he (the Roman Commander) called to him two of the centurions and said, Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen.

Do you have days when you wish you had just stayed in bed?

All of us have had those times when trouble won't go away...when hard times are followed by harder times. So it was with the Apostle Paul while he was in Jerusalem.

When things seemed like they couldn't get any worse, they did. Let's review the sequence of events since Paul arrived in Jerusalem.

1. James tells Paul that a group of Jews were not happy with him because they felt that he was not keeping the Jewish traditions and the Law.
2. Paul agrees to a ceremonial cleansing. He goes to the Temple to worship, where he was falsely accused by an angry mob of bringing a Gentile inside of the temple.
3. A riot ensues and a Roman commander enters just in time to save Paul's life.
4. Paul is bound with chains fulfilling the prophecy given in Chapter 19 and narrowly escapes a scourging because he declares that he is a Roman citizen.
5. Paul then asks the captain for an opportunity to speak to the mob again. When he mentions the Gentiles, the riot breaks out again.
6. Once more rescued by the Roman Commander, Paul is sent to face the Sanhedrin for judgment. Paul talks about the resurrection and an argument between the Pharisees and the Sadducees occurs. Once more the commander steps in.
7. When Paul's nephew tells the Commander there is a plot to kill Paul the next day, the commander decides to send Paul to Caesarea to be tried by the Roman court by night.

The plot was made by more than 40 men who vowed together that they would not eat again until Paul was dead. They must have gotten pretty hungry since the plot failed.

Paul now finds himself in a precarious position. He had been told by Jesus himself that he would not die until he reached Rome. But he was not told that he wouldn't face more difficult experiences. He also didn't know how God would get him out of this mess.

The Commander decides to send Paul to the Roman governor in Caesarea. Why do you think he did that?

Jerusalem and Caesarea were both in Palestine. Jerusalem was the center of the Jewish government; Caesarea was the headquarters of the Roman government.

The Commander's plan was simple and wise. He knew that he had to get Paul out of Jerusalem or there would be one murderous plot after another, and surely one of them would succeed. He also knew he could not hold a Roman citizen without charging him with a crime. Since he didn't know what crime to charge him with and he had to do something, he decides to send him to the governor. This solved both of his problems.

Let's start in Chapter 23 verse 23:

23 And he called to him two of the centurions and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen." 24 They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor.

I think it is interesting that God uses 470 sinful men as pawns to accomplish His will. Under normal conditions these soldiers would have been Paul's enemies. But instead, here they are protecting and escorting him out of Jerusalem in the middle of the night and taking him safely to Caesarea.

What application can we make of this in our lives?

The Commander's letter is very interesting. Look at verse 25.

25 And he wrote a letter having this form: 26 Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. 27 When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. 28 And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; 29 and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. 30 When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you.

What do you notice about the way Claudius Lysias states the problem at hand in his letter to Felix?

Claudius put himself in the best light. It was true they prevented Paul from being killed but it wasn't because they knew he was a Roman. Claudius thought Paul was an Egyptian and almost had him scourged.

In verse 29, Luke makes it clear that being a Christian was not an offense to the Romans. Just a quick review of that fact.

In Acts 16 the officials in Phillippi almost apologized to Paul. Look at verse 35:

35 Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, "Release those men." 36 And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace." 37 But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out." 38 The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, 39 and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city.

In Acts 18 Gallio in Corinth had refused to try him. Remember this story.

14 But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; 15 but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters."

In Acts 19, the town clerk told the 25,000 people in a mob that the Christians were innocent of any crime. Listen to verse 40.

40 "For indeed we are in danger of being accused of a riot in connection with today's events, since there is no real cause for it, and in this connection we will be unable to account for this disorderly gathering." 41 After saying this he dismissed the assembly.

And now in chapter 23, the Roman Commander from the temple fortress was writing the same thing in a letter to the governor.

So leaving at 9 o'clock, 470 soldiers escort Paul from Jerusalem to Antiparis which was about 37 miles away. Look at verse 31.

31 So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. 32 But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks.

So once they reached Antipatris, they must have felt that Paul was far enough away from the danger that the soldiers could return leaving the horsemen to continue on their own. When they arrived at Caesarea, Paul was turned over to the governor. Verse 33:

33 When these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him.

Felix was governor of Judea. He was married to Drusilla, a Jewess who was the daughter of Herod Agrippa 1. She had left her first husband to become Felix's third wife.

Felix was born a slave but because his brother was a favorite of Emperor Nero, Felix was set free. He then became the first slave in the history of the Romans to become a governor. He was ruthless, corrupt and murderous.

When Paul faces Felix, the only question he asks him is where he was from. Verse 34:

34 When he had read it, he asked from what province he was, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, 35 he said, I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also, giving orders for him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.

For just under a week Paul was held, until his accusers arrived from Jerusalem. After that, the high priest and some of the elders arrived with an attorney named Tertullus. This attorney was not hired for his legal counsel, but for his communication skills. He begins his prosecution by flattering Felix. Look at verse 1:

1 After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, with an attorney named Tertullus, and they brought charges to the governor against Paul. 2 After Paul had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying to the governor, Since we have through you attained much peace, and since by your providence reforms are being carried out for this nation, 3 we acknowledge this in every way and everywhere, A most excellent Felix, with all thankfulness. 4 But, that I may not weary you any further, I beg you to grant us, by your kindness, a brief hearing.

When the lawyer finishes his flattery, he makes 3 accusations against Paul. Verse 5:

5 For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. 6 And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him. We wanted to judge him according to our own Law. 7 But Lysias the commander came along, and with much violence took him out of our hands, 8 ordering his accusers to come before you. By examining him yourself concerning

all these matters you will be able to ascertain the things of which we accuse him.

First, he called Paul an instigator of trouble. The Roman officials placed great importance on civil order. This charge claimed that Paul was a threat to that orderliness.

Second, he claimed that Paul was a leader of a cult, thus linking him to a Messianic movement which sought to overthrow the governor's throne.

Third, he charged that Paul was a defiler of the temple. The Sadducees were, at times, pro-Roman. To defile the temple was to take issue with at least one segment of Jewry that somewhat tolerated the Roman rule.

When he had finished with these charges, the Jews joined in the attack, agreeing with him that these things were true. Verse 9.

9 The Jews also joined in the attack, asserting that these things were so.

These three charges were personal, political and doctrinal.

Let's look at them. Was Paul an instigator of trouble?

Well I guess it depends on whose side you are on. It seems to us that the Jerusalem Jews created trouble for Paul and not the other way around. But if you had asked the Jews from Lystra, Corinth and Ephesus, what would they have said about Paul?

The accusation given by the Asian Jews was that Paul had polluted the temple, but Tertullus said in verse 7 that Paul "even tried to desecrate the temple." Why the change? For at least two good reasons: first, Paul's accusers realized that the original charge could never be substantiated if the facts were investigated. But even more, the Asian Jews who started the story seemed to have vanished from the scene! If there were no witnesses, there could be no evidence or conviction.

This personal attack against Paul was the same personal attack brought against Jesus. It was untrue, but it seemed that no one was there to contradict the charge.

The second charge was a political one. The attorney accused Paul of trying to overthrow Felix's government. This was a much more serious charge because no Roman official wanted to be guilty of permitting illegal activities that would upset the Pax Romana which meant Roman peace.

Rome had given the Jews freedom to practice their religion, but the Roman officials kept their eyes on them lest they use their privilege to weaken the empire.

The third charge was doctrinal. Tertullus gave the impression that Paul had actually been guilty of profaning the temple, that the Jews had been within their rights in seizing him, and that the Commander had stepped out of line by interfering. He argued that it was Claudius, not the Jews, who was guilty of treating a Roman citizen with violence!

At that point Felix knew the lawyer was lying. Why?

Felix had the official letter before him and was more likely to believe his Commander than a paid Hellenistic Jewish lawyer.

Tertullus knew that the Jews had authority from Rome to arrest and prosecute those who violated Jewish Law. The Romans thought that the Jews' devotion to their traditions was excessive and superstitious; yet Rome wisely let them have their way.

The Jews were even permitted to execute guilty offenders in capital cases, such as Paul's "offense" of permitting Gentiles to cross the protective barricade in the temple. Tertullus argued that if Claudius had not interfered, the Jews would have tried Paul themselves, and this would have saved Felix and Rome a great deal of trouble and expense.

Now it was time for Felix to hear from Paul. But that will have to wait until next week when we finish Chapter 24.

It occurred to me that some of you may feel persecuted. It may be that every day seems to bring more and more problems. When you think things can't possibly get worse, they do. I'm sure that is how Paul felt. I have certainly felt that way in the past.

So what can we do when problems seem overwhelming and God seems so far away?

I find it helpful to recite some familiar scripture. What are some verses that help you?

I guess my favorite verse in times of trouble is Prov 3:6. It says:

5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.