

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 23 as we continue our study through the book of Acts.

This chapter that we're looking at tonight, you could really name it "God's View of Us in His Grace." You remember that Paul, on his third missionary journey as it was winding down, really felt led of the Lord to bring offerings from various Gentile churches, and their elders along with him from these places, to help the poor church in Jerusalem. His plan was to bridge the gap between the Gentiles that had been saved by grace, and knew God that way, and the Jewish Christians who had a much harder time just letting grace be grace. It would take a while, but it was certainly something that was divisive in the early church. And so that was Paul's idea, and as he and his team, for the last time on that third missionary journey, traveled towards Jerusalem, everywhere Paul stopped he was warned there was trouble ahead, and captivity awaited him and bondage and all and chains. And there was this woe from friends and prophets and folks he'd never known as well, or I should say complete strangers told him sometimes, "Don't go." Paul really believed this was God's calling. In fact, he said a couple of times, "My death would be a small price to pay to bring God's Word to bear."

Eventually Paul did arrive. He brought with him these wonderfully kind and exceptional gifts from others around the world, really. The church was glad to see him. When James and the leadership in Jerusalem were told of the exploits of Paul amongst all of the Gentiles, there was a bunch of excitement, I guess. "Oh, the Lord is good," and "Praise the Lord." But then immediately, James said, "There're a lot of zealous people here, too." But he didn't say zealous for Jesus. He said, "We're zealous for souls." He said, "They're zealous for the law." And that's really what the big conflict was in Jerusalem. It was the folks that had come to know the Lord, but they hadn't let go of the crutch and of the institution of those things that now had been fulfilled in Christ.

And so they offered to Paul a solution they thought that would minimize what they knew about Paul there, and that was that he taught Gentiles to forget about the law and just walk in grace. Not really true in that regard but true in the theological sense. And they said to Paul, "There're four men here. They're going to

make a Nazirite vow. They're going to have to take a week off work. It's going to cost money. They have to offer sacrifices. Maybe you could just fund them. And if you'll go with them every day, people will say, 'Oh, the things we heard about Paul weren't so bad as we thought, and then there'll be some healing, and everything will go well.' " And Paul agreed to the compromise; it was a compromise for him because even though he did that himself, he realized how the gospel worked - he'd been at it for years - and it was just by grace. It was through Christ alone.

But Paul did it - kind of tried to meet them halfway, hoping somehow there'd be peace. It was fine for the week, until the end of the week, and some of the Jews who were there from Ephesus - where Paul had spent three of his years planting a church - accused Paul of being in the area of the inner courts of the Temple with a Gentile, something that was against the law. It was against the law in the Old Testament. And for the record, they were wrong even if they were just mistaken, and I think they made it up. But needless to say Paul hadn't done that, but the conflict began. These few people - and there were only a few - began to stir up the crowds and scream about Paul having violated the law and all, and rather than the compromise working, it got worse. They began to riot. They grabbed Paul. They began to beat him, and it sounded like (when we were reading that a couple of chapters ago) Paul might very well have been killed by these zealots were it not for a Roman who came - a fellow named Claudius Lysias - out of the Antonia Fortress, and he saved Paul from the crowd. When he was taking him back up the stairs to the Antonia Fortress, in the corner of the Temple area, Paul asked if he could speak to the crowd; and not knowing, really, what the problem was, the captain said, "Well, sure. Go ahead."

And Paul found himself in a place that he really believed that somehow this is what the Lord wanted him to do, that dream all of his life. He was sent to the Gentiles, but he really wanted to minister to the Jews, his people. Figured, himself, there was no one more well qualified. "I've been through it more than you have and been more zealous than any of you probably could have been. You're gonna listen to what I have to say, and it's gonna make a difference in your life." And so Paul began to speak to the crowds - they were there a lot, by the hundreds of thousands for Pentecost; shared with them how he was converted; told them of his zealous background - how he had killed and locked up believers of the Way and all; and then finally said, "As I was in the Temple praying, the Lord told me to get out of Jerusalem because He said, 'You're not safe here. I'm going to send you far away to the Gentiles.' " And the minute the word "Gentiles" came out, they rioted again,

and they barely could get Paul up the stairs to save him, if you will. And so, he was taken into protective custody. They were about to scourge him, but he let them know he was a Roman citizen, and so that was about the end of that, if you will, at the end of chapter 22 there.

And so we start tonight with Paul in custody, having caused a riot - twice; once for supposedly bringing a Gentile into the Temple area, again for his message that he preached (really what God had called him to do). And tonight, we want to pick up in chapter 23 because here's a man who has planned so much to do so well and seems to have failed in every regard when it comes to Jerusalem and the Jews. Verse 30 says (of the last chapter), "The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him" (Claudius did, released Paul) "from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council" (the Sanhedrin) "to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them." He's putting them together because the captain wanted to know what was going on; he wanted to resolve the issue. For the Roman captain, word getting back to Rome that he's lost control would have been his job, maybe even his life. Everybody worked out of fear in that regard. So, "Paul, you speak first."

We read, in verse 1 (chapter 23), "Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, 'Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.' " He looked around "earnestly." He sized up the room. He was probably swollen in the face. I mean, these guys had been clobbering him pretty good. He looks out at men with whom he, at one time, used to sit on the very court; he was a part of this Sanhedrin. Now he was viewed by the insiders as a traitor, as someone they wanted to silence, someone they planned to kill. And I'm sure that, in Paul's mind, the prophecies from the road must have been ringing in his ear. "Oh, man, they're being verified, all right. This has not been easy." He calls them "men and brethren." The word "brethren" or "brothers" is very familiar or familial in the sense that that's not the way you would formally address this court; it would be "fathers" or "honorable rulers." But Paul felt familiar enough with these folks, and he cared for them, that he really wanted to speak to them. And so, with all the things they've tried to do to him the last couple of days, he speaks to them in very kind tones, and he begins by saying, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." That's quite a statement. Have you done that? Not violated your conscience before God? That's an amazing statement to make, isn't it? But I read somewhere one time that someone said, "If you really want to have a clear conscience, you really need to have a really bad memory." (Laughing) And I

thought, well, that's probably closer to the truth. But yet, as a Christian - and when we start 2 Corinthians here on Sunday mornings in a couple of weeks, we're going to spend a whole morning talking about conscience. It's a great subject in the Bible. But we can kind of brush across it this evening.

Paul's salvation had dramatically changed him from the inside, out. We know that when the Lord saved Paul, one of the things the Lord said to Paul was, "It's been hard for you to kick against the pricks of your conscience" (Acts 9:5), really, the work of God's Spirit. Paul's conscience was troubled. Though he outwardly looked like maybe he was doing the right religious thing - everyone applauded him - deep down inside, Paul knew better. When the Lord saved Paul - even as you and I, when we are saved - God, by His promise, cleans our slate. Things are made new. Paul will write to Timothy (years from now), "I was a former blasphemer and a prosecutor and a very insolent man, but I obtained mercy from the Lord because I was doing those things in unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:13). And so Paul came to a place of salvation that really made his conscience new again. Right? Not conforming to this present world, he was being changed and delivered from his old ways. And he really had peace about not only the life that he was living but also the fact, in this context, that he had been called by the Lord to preach to the Gentiles the gospel. "This isn't violating my conscience or the will of God or the Word of God." This is something that God wanted.

But a conscience is interesting because, in some ways, it is that inherent kind of understanding placed in the heart of every man to know right from wrong; the basic tenets. Conscience only extends to what you know is the best, and not everyone knows the best. And so people can have a clear conscience when they should maybe not have one at all. But by and large, as it starts, conscience is that internal clock that says, "This is right, that's wrong." When Paul wrote to the Romans in chapter 2:14, and he talked to them about the Gentiles, he said, "If the Gentiles who don't have the law do the things by nature that the law requires, then they are a law unto themselves," and he talked about their conscience permitting or absolving or excusing or condemning. So there's that basic, built-in kind of Geiger counter, if you will. It kind of goes off when things are going in the wrong direction. And God has a way of keeping you right with Him. And Paul says to these men, who are the religious rulers and the sin sniffers and the opinionated folks, "Look, in my heart before God, I'm at peace." Now, we know that your conscience can be seared, as we read in the Bible (1 Timothy 4:2). Sin can dull your response so that it's almost as if it is dead, and the convictions that once bothered

you don't bother you anymore. But yet when God's Word gets in, "the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart" so that your conscience becomes good. That's what Paul wrote (1 Timothy 1:5).

So, Paul was a man that was being freed from the guilt of sin by the grace of God. We started by saying this is really a chapter that talks about how God looks at us in grace - God's view of His own through the eyes of grace. So, the work of the Holy Spirit in Paul's life had convicted him. His conscience had functioned properly. And, as a result, Paul was able to say, "My conscience is clear." He didn't say he's sinless. None of us could say that. But I think there's something to be said for the goal of your life being a clear conscience before God. "I'm doing my best. I'm putting Your Word first." And I think that it is possible, biblically, to have a good conscience, a clear conscience before the Lord. And Paul really felt like he hadn't violated the spirit or the intent of the law by preaching Jesus to the Gentiles. Well, just that declaration - I mean, that's one sentence - "I've got a clear conscience, brothers, before the Lord."

We read, in verse 2, "And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth." That's no way to treat a guy, is it? "Then Paul said to him, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?' " Ananias was one of the most wicked priests that the nation had ever seen. Historically, he served in that capacity from 52-59 A.D. He eventually was killed by his own countrymen for his pro-Roman positions, if that makes any sense. He was a zillionaire because he used the offerings at the Temple kind of as a Mafia type, running the money-changing businesses, rotten to the core. If a guy has no conscience, this might be the guy; and he orders that Paul be slapped for having one. Notice that Paul's response is in anger - loses his cool, doesn't turn the other cheek, hairs and tears into this guy, "Well, God will smite you, you whitewashed wall!" The reference to "whitewashing" - at most all of the celebrations in Israel during that time, when the crowds by the thousands would come, they would paint gravestones white so that you wouldn't accidentally touch one and become ceremonially unclean. The reference is it looked good on the surface but underneath nothing but dead men's bones. Right? But you're all-dressed-up-with-no-place-to-go kind of thing. So, Paul doesn't take it very well. Right? He's got a clear conscience in verse 1, but in verse 3 he lets it fly. And he says why - here's his anger; he's angry at the hypocrisy of a man who would sit in judgment against him while, Paul said, "Hitting me, I haven't been tried, I haven't been punished, I

haven't been found guilty. There's no due process. You can't be punishing me!" And he quotes out of Deuteronomy 25, which basically said you can't do any of that.

So here's the high priest, the guy that's representing the Lord in that kind of a way, stepping over his bounds. If you compare this to John 18, you might remember that Jesus was taken here as well. He was brought here, and the high priest asked him about the disciples, about His doctrine. Jesus said that He'd spoken openly to the world and had taught in the synagogues and in the Temple, that He hadn't said anything in secret. "Why are you asking Me? Ask these people. I've been telling them for a long time who I am and why I've come." And the officer that stood by Jesus slapped Him in the face. Do you remember that? And he said "Why do you answer the high priest like that?" And Jesus said, "If I've spoken evil, then tell Me what it is. And if not, explain why you just hit Me." A little different tone, certainly. Paul's a good example; Jesus is always the best example for us.

But, needless to say, the question becomes - what in the world does Paul do here, and what do we see (because we're supposed to learn from the narrative)? Notice that we read, in verse 4, "And those who stood by said, 'Do you revile God's high priest?' Then Paul said, 'I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people," ' " and he quotes out of Exodus 22. So here's my question for you - hopefully you're reading ahead before you show up on Wednesdays - what's going on here? Was it an oversight? In other words, this meeting was called kind of in the morning, first thing, everyone was summoned by the ruler, if you will, from the army. The captain wanted a meeting. The high priest, maybe, wasn't wearing his robes. Paul didn't recognize him. And because he didn't, he doesn't honor the position because he doesn't see it. Is it an oversight? Maybe it is out of sight. Paul wasn't in Jerusalem very long or very often. So he might very well not have known this guy at all or had any relationship with him at all. Or maybe it was his eyesight. It would be a good, reasonable argument in the Bible to say that Paul's thorn in the flesh was probably his inability to see very well. He writes, in 1 Corinthians 16:21, at the end, "I've written this salutation with my own hand," kind of like that was very odd because he usually couldn't do that. He wrote the same thing in Galatians 6:11, "See with what larger letters I have written to you with my own hand!" So Paul probably had an issue; so whether it was oversight or out of sight or his eyesight, or maybe he had clear sight - maybe Paul just wanted to be sarcastic. Maybe he wanted to say, "Well, I don't think a high priest should act like that! No

wonder I didn't recognize you!" I have no idea. I've read every book I know. None of them is convincing. So I'll just leave it with you. Good luck with that. But I do see, in verse 5, that Paul apologizes. "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest." So that'll eliminate maybe everything but clear sight. Paul probably wasn't being sarcastic; although I would have appreciated it if he had been.

So, when Paul was told who he spoke to in that manner, or who gave the order, Paul quotes the Scriptures and says, "I know from my Bible that God doesn't want me to speak evil of a ruler over us"even a guy as wicked as this guy. So, maybe you can remember that the next time you want to talk about our politicians. In emotion and in your frustration you can certainly sin against God with your mouth by speaking about others. You might want to go read Romans 13 where it talks about that for conscience sake we should submit ourselves to all governing authorities because God puts them in a place of power. Ultimately, the big picture (when you stand back) is God decides who will rule over us or not. You can make a pretty good argument, biblically, for the fact that if the people seek God, they get good leaders. There are no places - almost no places - in the Bible where a nation that cries out to the Lord gets a horrible leader. It is usually the result of horrible people who do horrible things, and the Lord goes, "Well, you can have what you want. You reap what you sow." And it's horrible.

So we even, as the church today, may complain and moan about the leadership that we have, the way that people behave themselves, and let's face it - the things they do are atrocious most of the time. However, God may very well be giving to us what we deserve, and we need to be crying out for His grace. So it's hard to make the argument beyond just "God's in charge." So we seek the Lord. If you really want to change the government, here's the best thing to do - go lead people to Christ. Because if enough people start walking with Jesus, you'll get what you find in other situations where the people predominantly were seeking God. And it doesn't require a majority - you'll never find that - but it requires a significant amount of crying out from the church, and God could bless.

So I'm not sure what happens here. Paul was sorry that he did it. He said he wouldn't do it. He said, "I know that the Bible says I shouldn't speak evil of a ruler of the people," even an evil ruler. There was nobody as rotten as this guy, and yet he still qualified to be respected. Maybe look at David's relationship with Saul. Here's a guy that David only served, and Saul turned on him. And here's a guy that God pulled out of leadership and said, "You're not going to continue." And yet he

held on to power by force for seven and a half years beyond that. David honored the office, but he also honored the individual; he never spoke evil of Saul - he just kind of left it alone. By the time that you get to 1 Peter 2:17, Peter will write, "Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king." Now that was written at a time when the king was Nero, who burned Christians as lighters for his walkways at his palace. The guy couldn't have been a more heinous guy in the world, and the Lord said, "Honor the king." So, it doesn't mean you shouldn't be involved. I've always believed, biblically, that the church should be political in the sense of individual participation; you should vote, you should pray about who you vote for. I will never get in this pulpit and tell you who to vote for because the minute I do, that'll be the guy that'll go south really fast, and we'll all look like idiots. But you should be responsible to the Lord, get involved - whatever it is that God gives you to do. But the answer isn't politics; it's Christ.

So, when Jeremiah was sent by the LORD to the captive people that were in Babylon (they were going to be there for seventy years), the LORD, through the prophet, said to the captive people that were under the gun, politically, from the Babylonians (Jeremiah 29:5-7), "Just build your houses and dwell in them. Plant your gardens. Eat the fruit. Take wives, have children. And increase in the land so that you don't diminish. And seek the peace of the city in which you're being held captive. Bless the city. And pray to the LORD for the city because if they have peace, you have peace." So there was that relationship of a captive people that belonged to God in the midst of the heathen. And the suggestion is, "Pray and be involved and serve and play a part." So I'm all for you being involved politically. I just can't see it having a place in the pulpit. And so, if that's what you're looking for, you won't find it here.

Verse 6 tells us, "But when Paul perceived that 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;' " (you want to know what his father was, his father was a religious man) " 'concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!' " Now, as Paul looked out over this body that he was well familiar with, he realized that the deck was stacked against him. He "perceived" the division of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife. Imagine being a religious leader in a religious country where you don't believe in God; no angels, no heaven, no hell. When you die, that's it. You're over with. And then you have the other part of the ruling body who believes in all of those things. Now, their concept of God was very wrong, but they believed in a God. They

believed in life after death. They believed in the resurrection. So those were the two divisions. And Paul was pretty smart. He looked around and said, "Well, here's one way I can win. I can take sides with at least half of them." So he took the side of the things that he would believe in, "I believe in the resurrection and faith," and I think God gave to Paul divine wisdom right on the spot. Paul was looking (kind of) for a way out. The Lord had promised (in Matthew 10:19) that, "in the very hour that you need to be wise, the Holy Spirit will tell you what to say; you don't even need to know how to work it out." And I think that's a pretty good example of that. Paul look out, and he went, "Oh, lots of Pharisees." Wore different robes, played for different teams.

And so Luke, in verse 8, describes them. He says, in verse 7 first, "And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection - and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, 'We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.' Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks." I doubt Paul intended to start another riot. This would be riot #3 in two days. But there really is no greater strife that you'll find in the world than when you begin to mix politics with religion. You can find that in every country on the planet. Right? And I want you to notice something. These guys were all bound to destroy Paul and the message of the gospel until he sided with them politically or even religiously, to some extent, and now he's all of a sudden a friend of the Pharisees. Isn't that interesting? You know, when it's time to vote, all of a sudden you get a lot of politicians that love you for praying; they want to have prayer times and prayer meetings and prayer breakfasts with the mayor. It doesn't happen until there's some stuff to be done. But you see it here as well. Right? There's this dragging him into their fold, so to speak. So, can you imagine being a religious leader in Israel and not being convinced that a God even exists? Well, this caused great upheaval even amongst the people. They started to fight with each other. And it was so bad that the commander thought he'd better get Paul out of there before he gets killed. And so Claudius Lysias is his name - we read about him in verse 10. He said, "Go get Paul before he gets hurt." And so they went down and got him, and, again, he doesn't want this to spill over and anybody in Rome to hear about it.

I suspect, looking at the narrative, that Paul went back to that barracks just crushed. He had come here with money in hand and a heart to help. He had preached with all that he had. He had given it his best shot. He had compromised with James. He had spent his own dollars and cents to support these four men, just to try to bridge the gap. He had spoken from the steps of the Antonia Fortress. People had gone nuts. He had met again with the folks, face to face. It had absolutely gone nowhere for him at all. It all seemed to end in a miserable failure, and his lifelong dream - fueled by his persuasion that no one would be better at it than him - to reach the nation of Israel comes crashing down around his ears. I mean, when he's able to write, "I would go to hell for them if they could go to heaven," (he wrote that!) "I would be cursed for their sake" (Romans 9:3), he had great passion and compassion for his people. No matter how they treated him. But this just didn't go anywhere at all. They didn't listen, they refused to hear. Paul took it hard and personally. He had his chance. He felt he blew it. He had come into town with lots of warnings to not come, and he came anyway. He tried to appease James, he tried to appease the church. He put out a lot of money. He was a subject of false accusations. He was beaten, he was arrested. He was refused. And in five minutes at this meeting, they're goin' nuts again. Paul must have just gone, "What in the world is going on?! Failed. I shouldn't have come. I wish I'd have listened. This hasn't done any good at all." I'm sure that the "what-ifs" went through his head. It would have gone through mine. "What if I hadn't said the word 'Gentile'? That made 'em nuts. Why did I have to lose it with the high priest? What if I hadn't taken the compromising offer from James? What if I hadn't mentioned the resurrection right when I did?" "What-ifs." How easy to wallow in the "what-ifs" of your failures to succeed in what you believe God's calling you to do. And you know the enemy's always there to just kind of lend you a hand and sink you a little deeper into the hole of self-loathing. I just see Paul getting dragged out of there going, "Man, I can't believe this!"

And I believe that because verse 11 says, "But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, 'Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.'" I believe what I just said to you about Paul because God has a way of knowing exactly how you feel, and the very next night, as Paul is still being held in protective custody, the Lord comes, and He stands by Paul. Calls him by name. Tells this beleaguered soldier, "Cheer up." It's probably the last thing he expected to hear from God. "I've dropped the ball so much. It's been a horrible end to my career." "Cheer up." And I don't know if you've noted it before, if you've read through the gospels, but it seems that the

words "cheer up" are one of Jesus' favorite phrases. You'll find it time and time again through Mathew and John, especially. The Lord just says to various people, "Just cheer up!" "How can I be cheery, Lord? Everything went backwards!" But look at Jesus' words with His son, Paul, here. He doesn't rebuke him, "Hey, I tried to warn ya." Doesn't chastise him, "You should have known better than to say that." Doesn't question him about his behavior. Paul could give himself low marks enough on his own. What does the Lord say? "Cheer up. Be encouraged." And this isn't the first time that the Lord had visited Paul in the darkest of times. You remember, if you've been with us, when Paul showed up in Corinth (Acts 8) all by himself and at the end of his rope, and everywhere he stopped, he either got beat up or no one listened. And he was all but getting ready to quit. When his buddies showed up, he was a little encouraged, but when the Lord showed up, he was much encouraged. "No one's going to hurt you, I'll be with you," and for the next year and a half, he stayed in Corinth just ministering to the people. And it was that meeting from the Lord, that word from the Lord, directly to Paul that had made all the difference. In his early years (we read it last week, Acts 22), when Paul was in the Temple, it was Jesus who came to Paul and said, "I'm going to send you far and wide to reach the Gentiles." And Paul went that way, not because he would have chosen that but because he knew that God had chosen that for him. In a couple of weeks, when we get Paul on a boat to Rome (Acts 27), there is a heavy storm at sea, and it looks like everything is lost. And I don't know if you're good at storms at sea - I get so seasick, it bothers me to read about it, but I can just imagine being at the bottom of a boat, tied up, unable to.....oh, my goodness.....I'd have prayed to die. But the Lord came and stood by Paul and told him stuff, and he was able to go and take over the ship and give directions to everyone. "Cheer up, Paul. And here's why you can be cheerful, Paul. You've been a good witness for Me here." "I have not." "I've had you testify to them."

And instead of condemnation, the Lord brings commendation, not mentioning anything that Paul might have thought was a failure - his compromise, his aggressive style in preaching, his anger, shootin' off at the mouth at the high priest. Whatever it might have been, the Lord could have brought up a lot of stuff. He doesn't bring up any of it because, like I said, this is a chapter about God seeing His people through the eyes of grace - even a guy like Paul. So, "Cheer up, man. Cheer up. You've been fine. Good job. Even though they didn't receive you, it was a good effort." And I love the words. It says that the Lord came to stand by him. Stand by this failure. Jesus didn't see Paul's failure at all like Paul saw it, and I think that's important for you to know. You know, we're not so easy on

ourselves when it comes to spiritual things. And I know that we shouldn't cut ourselves a lot of slack. But, on the other hand, if you've done your best, and even if it fails, God's really good at knowing exactly what you've done. And I like the picture here because I think Paul just was at wits' end, but these words from the Lord meant everything to Paul. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Those are real promises, aren't they? Romans 8:31. Or, "Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us." "Who can condemn you?" That's Romans 8:34. But it's in that same little package there. Right? "If He's for you, who can be against you?" And I think Paul needed to learn that now. We see our failures; the Lord sees our successes. Sees the success despite what we categorize as failure. And I love that. I mean, I think about "God is not unjust to forget your labor of love which you've shown toward His name, your ministering to others" (Hebrews 6:10). "God is not unjust to forget." You don't necessarily see it as an accomplishment, but He does. In Matthew 10:42, Jesus said, "If you'll just give the least one of these a cup of water in the name of a disciple, you won't lose the reward." "Not even if you do it for Me. You just do it in the name of someone who loves Me, I'll keep good track of it, that you've done that."

Satan is always so quick to minimize your efforts in Christ to show you your failures. But I would say to you that the Lord keeps different records, and I think that should be encouraging to you and to me. Go to Hebrews 11 and read those forty verses of accomplishments in faith of the Old Testament saints that Paul wrote to a Hebrew believing church that was thinking of quitting because the Lord hadn't come back and life was hard. And so he concludes his ten and a half chapters of doctrine by saying, in chapter 11, "Look at all these folks, and they ran their race at a time when things were really hard." But go look at those names again. For example, Rahab - she lied to save spies. If you go read the passage, you go, "Wait a minute. What's she doin' lyin'?" And people want to jump down her throat, "She's a liar!" Yeah, she got saved Old-Testament style two minutes earlier. She did the best that she could. Her heart was clear, but her actions were foolish. Yet you get to Hebrews 11, God doesn't mention the lying; He just mentions the faith. It moved the heart of God. Gideon needed one more sign. "How many signs do you need, buddy, before you can go fight? Really?!" The fleece was dry, the fleece was wet. "Come on! Just one more time." And you read Gideon's story, and you go, "You baby!" And the LORD goes, "That's My baby." He was thrilled with Gideon. Samson is in the hall of faith. Really?! How did he get in there? Back door. Unlocked. That's the only way I can see it. (Laughing) Barak,

he wouldn't go to war with the promises of God unless Deborah went with him. Really? "I won't go unless you go" (Pastor Jack speaks in a whining tone). You little punk. Come on! (Laughing) God doesn't say that. He doesn't say, "Oh, you're hiding behind Deborah's skirt, are you?" He just mentions his faith. What on the outward looks like pretty much a failure, God saw as a success. The Father finds faith in the midst of weakness that pleases Him. You can go back and read chapter 11 of Hebrews and say, well, at least Barak eventually went, and he did. And Gideon eventually went, and he did. And Samson, at the end of his life, gave his life for the things of God, and God noticed. And He took notice of it. And Rahab, she knew so little and yet she believed so much in comparison to everyone else that she's the only one that survives the onslaught of Jericho. She gets through it because of her faith. So, when you read the Lord saying, "Cheer up, Paul, you did a good job," you want to go, "I don't think he did such a good job." Yeah, the Lord didn't ask you what you thought; He's telling you what He thinks. And I think there's something to be said for the fact that the Lord would say, "You've been a good witness here, and now I'm going to send you to Rome. You're on the right path. You're in the right place. You've come to the right stop." If there was ever a doubt that Paul might say, "I shouldn't have come here, all the people told me," the Lord said, "No, no. You're fine. It's not easy to be in the place where God wants you to be, but you're in the right place." It's an amazing word of encouragement from the Lord. And in Acts 19, Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem, and then he said to his disciples, verse 21, "When I get to Jerusalem, I want to then go to Rome." It was on his bucket list. Not like this. He didn't want a free trip in handcuffs. But he wanted to go to Rome. And God promised he could get there, just not the way, maybe, Paul had planned. Here's the bottom line - God wasn't shelving him for his failures; "God had greater plans for me." And I don't doubt that that night, in that jail or in that protective custody place, Paul had a good night's sleep, maybe for the first time. Because all that had been going wrong, it was right with God. If it's right with God, who cares? Right? If He's happy, we're happy.

Verse 12, "And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul." Nice religious leaders. "Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, 'We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul. Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to

make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near.' " So the Lord now gives to us an insight into a large conspiracy of religious zealots and the complicity of the Sanhedrin who would do their part by saying to the commander, Claudius, "Hey, could we have another meeting? The last one didn't go so well, and we could maybe do better."

Verse 16 says this, "So when Paul's sister's son" (his nephew) "heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, 'Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him.' So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, 'Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you.' Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside, and asked privately, 'What is it that you have to tell me?' And he said, 'The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you.' So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, 'Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me.' " Now, I love how God works and how God takes care of you when you're walking with Him. And again, it's an assurance Paul's in the right place doin' the right thing. There's a Scripture in Isaiah 54:17 that says, "No weapon formed against you shall prosper." And so here are these forty zealots who enter into a plot, kind of a cloak-and-dagger, nod-nod, wink-wink, whispers. But here's the weird thing: Paul's sister's boy somehow finds out about it. What is the likelihood of this happening? Some young kid who the commander holds by the hand (so he's a young kid) somehow standing around, gets all the information, goes and spills the beans to Paul, and he gets word to the commander, and Paul is delivered from what was a sure death. I love the way God works! He overhears a top-secret plan, a covert operation, just Paul and his little nephew. I love how God delights in moving behind the scenes. There is something about the supernaturally natural that I think sometimes escapes us. And I'm going to point it out to you in a couple of weeks because we're going to run into some really amazing ways. But I think that we're always looking for the supernatural, aren't we? And we do things like, "Oh, and the hair stood up on my head. I felt the wind, and I'm pretty sure it was the Lord." Or, "I woke up, and I was shaking. I couldn't stop. Oh, it was the Lord." Okay. But more often than not, God works in ways that are absolutely natural - a rainstorm that wasn't forecast, a missed connection on a plane, a delay of some

kind, a chance meeting with someone. And unless you look with the eyes of faith, you'll miss how often God is working. Because omnipotence has His agents everywhere, even by the ears of a young boy who discovers - by the hand of God - the nefarious plans of others, forty of them, to murder his uncle; and he goes and rats them out. That's a miracle of God, isn't it? But yet no one else would notice that. But Paul did, and he understood.

I want you to also notice, because this is narrative and I've told you before - you learn from the examples and the pictures that God gives us, how kind this young boy is treated by the captain and by the centurions. Everywhere in the Bible that you turn, the Roman centurions are always painted in the most positive of lights in the Scriptures. Roman law was pretty fair, for the most part. So it's an interesting insight into the people that were taking the Jews captive. And that's not true of everyone, but Roman jurisprudence was pretty dependable most of the time. And they certainly, like I said, the centurions, shine in the Bible.

Verse 23, "And he" (Claudius) "called for two centurions, saying, 'Prepare two hundred soldiers,' " (remember, a centurion had a hundred soldiers under him) " 'seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night; and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor.' " And then he sat down to write Felix a letter. Four hundred and seventy men to protect one guy. I love how the Lord works. They sent him out at 9:00 at night, the third hour according to the Jewish clock designation beginning at sunset. They're going to send him from Jerusalem to Caesarea. The gates close at the city at some point where they can open them, let everyone out and shut it again; the gates would be closed at night. So that would kind of keep a lot of people away. The captain wasn't taking any chances. Caesarea, on the Roman pathway (it's a little different on the freeway today) is about 65 miles of travel from the coastal city of Caesarea up the hill to Jerusalem. Caesarea was the provincial capital for Rome. It was where Philip lived. You remember a couple of weeks ago Paul showed up in Caesarea and hung out with him for a while and was warned about what awaited him from here (Acts 21). Caesarea was governed by a fellow named Felix, who ruled in the same years as Ananias, 52-59 A.D. He was the only slave who got to that high of a level in the Roman government, at least that's been recorded. So no other person had come from that low of a status and become a governor. But he was a very wicked guy. He owed his job to friendships with Nero. Tacitus, who is a 1st century historian, wrote of this fellow Felix that he ruled with the mentality of a slave, always trying to pay back others for the years

of suffering. He was always angry, never up to any good, and felt like the world owed him a life, and he was going to get even with everyone that stepped in his way. So that's the guy that now Paul is sent to.

Here's what Claudius, verse 26, writes to send with Paul, the prisoner. "To the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them." (So that's how bad it had gotten.) "Coming with the troops I rescued him," (I always like when you write letters, and you always look like you're the best) "having learned that he was a Roman. And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains. And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell." So here's the letter Claudius writes. Other than, like I said, slanting the letter to make himself look good ("I rescued him, and he was a Roman"), it's pretty accurate. Right? Felix, and we'll learn next week more, knew the problems in Judea, especially Jerusalem. He would have been happy to handle this since he was responsible for that area. No one could intimidate him.

We read, in verse 31, "Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks. When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him." So it's 40 miles from Jerusalem to the hills of Antipatris, 25 more miles from there through the Sharon Valley to the city of Caesarea. Four hundred soldiers accompanied Paul 40 miles; seventy guys on horseback took him the other 25, the final leg.

Verse 34, "And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia, he said, 'I will hear you when your accusers also have come.' And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium." I read this and I want to say to myself, "I hope the saints in Caesarea are a little bit more supportive of Paul than the saints in Jerusalem, where none of them seemed to show up." That shouldn't be hard. Paul was kept under house arrest in the palace of Herod. We do have the ruins of that palace still in Israel today. Herod had built on the beach. It was a great place of R&R. We're going to find that Paul was able to visit with friends, and friends were able to come and see him. He had a pretty good time of it, I think. It wasn't like you

might view prison today. And being a Roman citizen without charges, you can bet he was well treated. Still, Paul has to sit and wait. He had just met with Jesus. He knew he was eventually going to Rome; he didn't know when. He would be left in prison, as we will find out next week, for two more years here. All he did was bring some money to some guys that were hurtin' and preach Jesus. Now he's going on his third year of prison. And no one seems to want to accuse him of anything, at least none but the Jews, but no one wants to let him go. He doesn't know he's going to be here for two years. We read ahead. He couldn't read ahead. But we'll take that up next week as we see his defense before Felix. And I love Paul standing before this governor because we're going to read that as he preaches the gospel to him, Felix shudders with fear. Felix almost made it. I don't know if he made it. But he almost made it. But making it almost is not making it at all. So read ahead. It'll be our last study for the year next week.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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