

CHAPTER 23

The close of the foregoing chapter left Paul in the high priest's court, into which the chief captain (whether to his advantage or no I know not) had removed his cause from the mob; and, if his enemies act there against him with less noise, yet it is with more subtlety. Now here we have,

I. Paul's protestation of his own integrity, and of a civil respect to the high priest, however he had upon a sudden spoken warmly to him, and justly (v. 1-5).

II. Paul's prudent contrivance to get himself clear of them, by setting the Pharisees and Sadducees at variance one with another (v. 6-9).

III. The governor's seasonable interposal to rescue him out of their hands likewise (v. 10).

IV. Christ's more comfortable appearing to him, to animate him against those difficulties that lay before him, and to tell him what he must expect (v. 11).

V. A bloody conspiracy of some desperate Jews to kill Paul, and their drawing in the chief priests and the elders to be aiders and abettors with them in it (v. 12-15).

VI. The discovery of this conspiracy to Paul, and by him to the chief captain, who perceived so much of their inveterate malice against Paul that he had reason enough to believe the truth of it (v. 16-22).

VII. The chief captain's care of Paul's safety, by which he prevented the execution of the design; he sent him away immediately under a strong guard from Jerusalem to Caesarea, which was now the residence of Felix, the Roman governor, and there he safely arrived (v. 23-35).

~~423~~ ACTS 23:1-5

PAUL'S SECOND DEFENCE

Perhaps when Paul was brought, as he often was (*corpus cum causa* — *the person and the cause together*), before heathen magistrates and councils, where he and his cause were slighted, because not at all understood, he thought, if he were brought before the sanhedrim at Jerusalem, he should be able to deal with them to some good purpose, and yet we do not find that he works at all upon them. Here we have,

I. Paul's protestation of his own integrity. Whether the chief priest put any question to him, or the chief captain made any representation of his case to the court, we are not told; but Paul appeared here,

1. With a good courage. He was not at all put out of countenance upon his being brought before such an august assembly, for which in his youth he had conceived such a veneration; nor did he fear their calling him to an account about the letters they gave him to Damascus, to persecute the Christians there, though (for aught we know) this was the first time he had ever seem them since; but *he earnestly beheld the council*. When Stephen was brought before them, they thought to have faced him down, but could not, such was his holy confidence; they *looked stedfastly on him, and his face was as that of an angel*, ~~445~~ Acts 6:15. Now that Paul was brought before them he thought to have faced them down, but could not, such was their wicked impudence. However, now was fulfilled in him what God promised to Ezekiel (~~408~~ Ezekiel 3:8, 9): *I have made thy face strong against their faces; fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks*.

2. With a good conscience, and that gave him a good courage.

— *Hic murus aheneus esto,
Nil conscire sibi* —

*Be this thy brazen bulwark of defence,
Still to preserve thy conscious innocence.*

He said, “*Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God unto this day. However I may be reproached, my heart does not reproach me, but witnesses for me.*”

(1.) He had always been a man inclined to religion; he never was a man that lived at large, but always put a difference between moral good and evil; even in his unregenerate state, he was, *as touching the righteousness that was in the law, blameless*. He was no unthinking man, who never considered what he did, no designing man, who cared not what he did, so he could but compass his own ends.

(2.) Even when he persecuted the church of God, he thought he ought to do it, and that he did God service in it. Though his conscience was misinformed, yet he acted according to the dictates of it. See ~~440~~ Acts 26:9.

(3.) He seems rather to speak of the time since his conversion, since he left the service of the high priest, and fell under their displeasure for so doing; he does not say, From my beginning until this day; but, “All the time in which you have looked upon me as a deserter, an apostate, and an enemy to your church, even *to this day*, I have *lived in all good conscience before God*; whatever you may think of me, I have in every thing approved myself to God, and lived honestly,” ~~280~~ Hosea 13:18. He had aimed at nothing but to please God and do his duty, in those things for which they were so incensed against him; in all he had done towards the setting up of the kingdom of Christ, and the setting of it up among the Gentiles, he had acted conscientiously. See here the character of an honest man.

[1.] He sets God before him, and lives as in his sight, and under his eyes, and with an eye to him. *Walk before me, and be thou upright.*

[2.] He makes conscience of what he says and does, and, though he may be under some mistakes, yet, according to the best of his knowledge, he abstains from that which is evil and cleaves to that which is good.

[3.] He is universally conscientious; and those that are not so are not at all truly conscientious; is so in *all manner of conversation*: “I have lived in all good conscience; have had my whole conversation under the direction and dominion of conscience.”

[4.] He continues so, and perseveres in it: “I have lived so *until this day*.” Whatever changes pass over him, he is still the same, strictly conscientious. And those who thus live in all good conscience before God may, like Paul here, *lift up their face without spot*; and, if their hearts condemn them not, may have confidence both towards God and man, as

Job had when he *still held fast his integrity*, and Paul himself, whose rejoicing was this, the testimony of his conscience.

II. The outrage of which Ananias the high priest was guilty: he *commanded those that stood by*, the beadles that attended the court, *to smite him on the mouth* (v. 2), to give him a dash on the teeth, either with a hand or with a rod. Our Lord Jesus was thus despitefully used in this court, by one of the servants (^{<482>}John 18:22), as was foretold, ^{<311>}Micah 5:1, *They shall smite the Judge of Israel upon the cheek*. But here was an order of court for the doing of it, and, it is likely, it was done.

1. The high priest was highly offended at Paul; some think, because he looked so boldly and earnestly at the council, as if he would face them down; others because he did not address himself particularly to him as president, with some title of honour and respect, but spoke freely and familiarly to them all, as men and brethren. His protestation of his integrity was provocation enough to one who was resolved to run him down and make him odious. When he could charge him with no crime, he thought it was crime enough that he asserted his own innocency.

2. In his rage he ordered him to be smitten, so to put disgrace upon him, and to be smitten on the mouth, as having offended with his lips, and in token of his enjoining him silence. This brutish and barbarous method he had recourse to when he *could not answer the wisdom and spirit wherewith he spoke*. Thus Zedekiah smote Micaiah (^{<1224>}1 Kings 22:24), and Pashur smote Jeremiah (^{<202>}Jeremiah 20:2), when they spoke in the name of the Lord. If therefore we see such indignities done to good men, nay, if they be done to us for well doing and well saying, we must not think it strange; Christ will give those the *kisses of his mouth* (^{<202>}Song of Solomon 1:2) who for his sake receive blows on the mouth. And though it may be expected that, as Solomon says, *every man should kiss his lips that giveth a right answer* (^{<246>}Proverbs 24:26), yet we often see the contrary.

III. The denunciation of the wrath of God against the high priest for this *wickedness in the place of judgment* (^{<2136>}Ecclesiastes 3:16): it agrees with what follows there, v. 17, with which Solomon comforted himself (*I said in my heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked*): *God shall smite thee, thou whited wall*, v. 3. Paul did not speak this in any sinful heat or passion, but in a holy zeal against the high priest's abuse of his power, and with something of a prophetic spirit, not at all with a spirit of revenge.

1. He gives him his due character: *Thou whited wall*; that is, thou hypocrite — a mud-wall, trash and dirt and rubbish underneath, but plastered over, or white-washed. It is the same comparison in effect with that of Christ, when he compares the Pharisees to whited sepulchres, ~~627~~ Matthew 23:27. Those that daubed with untempered mortar failed not to daub themselves over with something that made them look not only clean, but gay.

2. He reads him his just doom: “*God shall smite thee*, shall bring upon thee his sore judgments, especially spiritual judgments.” Grotius thinks this was fulfilled soon after, in his removal from the office of the high priest, either by death or deprivation, for he finds another in that office a little while after this; probably he was smitten by some sudden stroke of divine vengeance. Jeroboam's hand was withered when it was stretched out against a prophet.

3. He assigns a good reason for that doom: “For *sittest thou* there as president in the supreme judicature of the church, pretending to *judge me after the law*, to convict and condemn me by the law, and yet *commandest me to be smitten* before any crime is proved upon me, which is *contrary to the law?*” No man must be beaten unless he be *worthy to be beaten*, ~~628~~ Deuteronomy 25:2. It is against all law, human and divine, natural and positive, to hinder a man from making his defense, and to condemn him unheard. When Paul was beaten by the rabble, he could say, *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do*; but it is inexcusable in a high priest that is appointed to judge according to the law.

IV. The offence which was taken at this bold word of Paul's (v. 4): *Those that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest?* It is a probable conjecture that those who blamed Paul for what he said were believing Jews, who were zealous for the law, and consequently for the honour of the high priest, and therefore took it ill that Paul should thus reflect upon him, and checked him for it. See here then,

1. What a hard game Paul had to play, when his enemies were abusive to him, and his friends were so far from standing by him, and appearing for him, that they were ready to find fault with his management.

2. How apt even the disciples of Christ themselves are to overvalue outward pomp and power. As because the temple had been God's temple, and a magnificent structure, there were those who followed Christ that

could not bear to have any thing said that threatened the destruction of it; so because the high priest had been God's high priest, and was a man that made a figure, though he was an inveterate enemy to Christianity, yet these were disgusted at Paul for giving him his due.

V. The excuse that Paul made for what he had said, because he found it was a stumbling-block to his weak brethren, and might prejudice them against him in other things. These Jewish Christians, though weak, yet were brethren, so he calls them here, and, in consideration of that, is almost ready to recall his words; for *who is offended*, saith he, *and I burn not?* ⁴¹²2 Corinthians 11:29. His fixed resolution was rather to abridge himself in the use of his Christian liberty than give offence to a weak brother; rather than do this, he will *eat no flesh while the world stands*, ⁴¹³1 Corinthians 8:13. And so here though he had taken the liberty to tell the high priest his own, yet, when he found it gave offence, he cried *Peccavi — I have done wrong*. He wished he had not done it; and though he did not beg the high priest's pardon, nor excuse it to him, yet he begs their pardon who took offence at it, because this was not a time to inform them better, nor to say what he could say to justify himself.

1. He excuses it with this, that he did not consider when he said it to whom he spoke (v. 5): *I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest — ouk edein*. “I did not just then think of the dignity of his place, or else I would have spoken more respectfully to him.” I see not how we can with any probability think that Paul did not know him to be the high priest, for Paul had been seven days in the temple at the time of the feast, where he could not miss of seeing the high priest; and his telling him that *he sat to judge him after the law* shows that he knew who he was; but, says he, I did not consider it. Dr. Whitby puts this sense upon it, that the prophetic impulse that was upon him, and inwardly moved him to say what he did, did not permit him to notice that it was the high priest, lest this law might have restrained him from complying with that impulse; but the Jews acknowledged that prophets might use a liberty in speaking of rulers which others might not, as ²¹¹⁰Isaiah 1:10, 23. Or (as he quotes the sense of Grotius and Lightfoot) Paul does not go about to excuse what he had said in the least, but rather to justify it; “I own that God's high priest is not to be reviled, but I do not own this Ananias to be high priest. He is a usurper; he came to the office by bribery and corruption, and the Jewish rabbins say that he who does so is neither a judge nor to be honoured as such.” Yet,

2. He takes care that what he had said should not be drawn into a precedent, to the weakening of the obligation of that law in the least: *For it is written, and it remains a law in full force, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.* It is for the public good that the honour of magistracy should be supported, and not suffer for the miscarriages of those who are entrusted with it, and therefore that decorum be observed in speaking both of and to princes and judges. Even in Job's time it was not thought fit to *say to a king, Thou art wicked, or to princes, You are ungodly,* ^{<438>}Job 34:18. Even when we do well, and suffer for it, we must *take it patiently,* ^{<402>}1 Peter 2:20. Not as if great men may not hear of their faults, and public grievances be complained of by proper persons and in a decent manner, but there must be a particular tenderness for the honour and reputation of those in authority more than of other people, because the law of God requires a particular reverence to be paid to them, as God's vicegerents; and it is of dangerous consequence to have those any way countenanced who *despise dominions, and speak evil of dignities,* ^{<618>}Jude 1:8. *Curse not the king, no not in thy thought,* ^{<110>}Ecclesiastes 10:20.

~~<426>~~ ACTS 23:6-11

PAUL'S SECOND DEFENCE

Many are the troubles of the righteous, but some way or other the Lord delivereth them out of them all. Paul owned he had experienced the truth of this in the persecutions he had undergone among the Gentiles (see ^{<581>}2 Timothy 3:11): *Out of them all the Lord delivered me.* And now he finds that he who has delivered does and will deliver. He that delivered him in the foregoing chapter from the tumult of the people here delivers him from that of the elders.

I. His own prudence and ingenuity stand him in some stead, and contribute much to his escape. Paul's greatest honour, and that upon which he most valued himself, was that he was a Christian, and an apostle of Christ; and all his other honours he despised and made nothing of, in comparison with this, *counting them but dung, that he might win Christ;* and yet he had sometimes occasion to make use of his other honours, and they did him service. His being a citizen of Rome saved him in the foregoing chapter from his being scourged by the chief captain as a

vagabond, and here his being a Pharisee saved him from being condemned by the sanhedrim, as an apostate from the faith and worship of the God of Israel. It will consist very well with our willingness to suffer for Christ to use all lawful methods, nay, and arts too, both to prevent suffering and to extricate ourselves out of it. The honest policy Paul used here for his own preservation was to divide his judges, and to set them at variance one with another about him; and, by incensing one part of them more against him, to engage the contrary part for him.

1. The great council was made up of Sadducees and Pharisees, and Paul perceived it. He knew the characters of many of them ever since he lived among them, and saw those among them whom he knew to be Sadducees, and others whom he knew to be Pharisees (v. 6): *One part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees*, and perhaps nearly an equal part. Now these differed very much from one another, and yet they ordinarily agreed well enough to do the business of the council together.

(1.) The Pharisees were bigots, zealous for the ceremonies, not only those which God had appointed, but those which were enjoined by the tradition of the elders. They were great sticklers for the authority of the church, and for enforcing obedience to its injunctions, which occasioned many quarrels between them and our Lord Jesus; but at the same time they were very orthodox in the faith of the Jewish church concerning the world of spirits, the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

(2.) The Sadducees were deists — no friends to the scripture, or divine revelation. The books of Moses they admitted as containing a good history and a good law, but had little regard to the other books of the Old Testament; see ⁴⁰²³Matthew 22:23. The account here given of these Sadducees is,

[1.] That they *deny the resurrection*; not only the return of the body to life, but a future state of rewards and punishments. They had neither hope of eternal happiness nor dread of eternal misery, nor expectation of any thing on the other side death; and it was upon these principles that they said, *It is in vain to serve God*, and called the proud happy, ³⁰⁸⁴Malachi 3:14, 15.

[2.] That they denied the existence of angels and spirits, and allowed of no being but matter. They thought that God himself was corporeal, and had parts and members as we have. When they read of angels in the Old Testament, they supposed them to be messengers that God made and sent

on his errands as there was occasion, or that they were impressions on the fancies of those they were sent to, and no real existences — that they were this, or that, or any thing rather than what they were. And, as for the souls of men, they looked upon them to be nothing else but the temperament of the humours of the body, or the animal spirits, but denied their existence in a state of separation from the body, and any difference between the soul of a man and of a beast. These, no doubt, pretended to be free-thinkers, but really thought as meanly, absurdly, and slavishly, as possible. It is strange how men of such corrupt and wicked principles could come into office, and have a place in the great sanhedrim; but many of them were of quality and estate, and they complied with the public establishment, and so got in and kept in. But they were generally stigmatized as heretics, were ranked with the Epicureans, and were prayed against and excluded from eternal life. The prayer which the modern Jews use against Christians, Witsius thinks, was designed by Gamaliel, who made it, against the Sadducees; and that they meant them in their usual imprecation, *Let the name of the wicked rot*. But how degenerate was the character and how miserable the state of the Jewish church, when such profane men as these were among their rulers!

2. In this matter of difference between the Pharisees and Sadducees Paul openly declared himself to be on the Pharisees' side against the Sadducees (v. 6): He *cried out*, so as to be heard by all, "*I am a Pharisee, was bred a Pharisee, nay, I was born one, in effect, for I was the son of a Pharisee, my father was one before me, and thus far I am still a Pharisee that I hope for the resurrection of the dead, and I may truly say that, if the matter were rightly understood, it would be found that this is it for which I am now called in question.*" When Christ was upon earth the Pharisees set themselves most against him, because he witnessed against their traditions and corrupt glosses upon the law; but, after his ascension, the Sadducees set themselves most against his apostles, because they *preached through Jesus the resurrection of the dead*, ~~Acts~~ Acts 4:1, 2. And it is said (~~Acts~~ Acts 5:17) that they were *the sect of the Sadducees that were filled with indignation at them, because they preached that life and immortality which is brought to light by the gospel*. Now here,

(1.) Paul owns himself a Pharisee, so far as the Pharisees were in the right. Though as Pharisaism was opposed to Christianity he set himself against it, and against all its traditions that were set up in competition with the law of God or in contradiction to the gospel of Christ, yet, as it was opposed to

Sadducism, he adhered to it. We must never think the worse of any truth of God, nor be more shy of owning it, for its being held by men otherwise corrupt. If the Pharisees will hope for the resurrection of the dead, Paul will go along with them in that hope, and be one of them, whether they will or no.

(2.) He might truly say that being persecuted, as a Christian, this was the thing he was called in question for. Perhaps he knew that the Sadducees, though they had not such an interest in the common people as the Pharisees had, yet had underhand incensed the mob against him, under pretence of his having preached to the Gentiles, but really because he had preached the hope of the resurrection. However, being called in question for his being a Christian, he might truly say he was called in question for the hope of the resurrection of the dead, as he afterwards pleaded, ^{<44815>}Acts 24:15, and ^{<44816>}Acts 26:6, 7. Though Paul preached against the traditions of the elders (as his Master had done), and therein opposed the Pharisees, yet he valued himself more upon his preaching the resurrection of the dead, and a future state, in which he concurred with the Pharisees.

3. This occasioned a division in the council. It is probable that the high priest sided with the Sadducees (as he had done ^{<44817>}Acts 5:17, and made it to appear by his rage at Paul, v. 2), which alarmed the Pharisees so much the more; but so it was, there arose a *dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees* (v. 7), for this word of Paul's made the Sadducees more warm and the Pharisees more cool in the prosecution of him; so that *the multitude was divided; eschisthe* — *there was a schism*, a quarrel among them, and the edge of their zeal began to turn from Paul against one another; nor could they go on to act against him when they could not agree among themselves, or prosecute him for breaking the unity of the church when there was so little among them of the unity of the spirit. All the cry had been against Paul, but now there arose a great cry against one another, v. 9. So much did a fierce furious spirit prevail among all orders of the Jews at this time that every thing was done with clamour and noise; and in such a tumultuous manner were the great principles of their religion stickled for, by which they received little service, for *the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*. Gainsayers may be convinced by fair reasoning, but never by a great cry.

4. The Pharisees hereupon (would one think it?) took Paul's part (v. 9): *They strove, diemachonto* — *They fought, saying, We find no evil in this*

man. He had conducted himself decently and reverently in the temple, and had attended the service of the church; and, though it was but occasionally, yet it showed that he was not such an enemy to it as he was said to be. He had spoken very handsomely in his own defence, and given a good account of himself, and had now declared himself orthodox in the great principles of religion, as well as regular and conscientious in his conversation; and therefore they cannot see that he has *done any thing worthy of death or bonds.* Nay, they go further, “*If a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him concerning Jesus, and put him upon preaching as he does, though we may not be so far satisfied as to give credit to him, yet we ought to be cautioned not to oppose him, lest we be found fighting against God;*” as Gamaliel, who was himself a Pharisee, had argued, ^{<415>}Acts 5:39. Now here,

(1.) We may observe, to the honour of the gospel, that it was witnessed to even by its adversaries, and confessions, not only of its innocency, but of its excellency, were extorted sometimes by the power of truth even from those that persecuted it. Pilate found no fault in Christ though he put him to death, nor Festus in Paul though he detained him in bonds; and the Pharisees here supposed it possible that Paul might have a commission sent him for heaven by an angel to do what he did; and yet it should seem, as elders, they after this joined with the high priest in prosecuting him, ^{<421>}Acts 24:1. They sinned against the knowledge which they not only had, but sometimes owned, as Christ had said of them, *They have both seen and hated both me and my Father,* ^{<424>}John 15:24. Yet,

(2.) We will hope that some of them at least did henceforward conceive a better opinion of Paul than they had had, and were favourable to him, having had such a satisfactory account both of his conversation in all good conscience and of his faith touching another world; and then it must be observed to their honour that their zeal for the traditions of the elders, which Paul had departed from, was so far swallowed up in a zeal for the great and fundamental doctrines of religion, to which Paul still adhered, that if he will heartily join with them against the Sadducees, and adhere to the hope of the resurrection of the dead, they will not think his shaking off the ceremonial law to be an evil in him, but charitably hope that he walks according to the light God has given him by some angel or spirit, and are so far from persecuting him that they are ready to patronize and protect him. The persecuting Pharisees of the church of Rome are not of this spirit: for let a man be ever so sincere and zealous for all the articles of the

Christian faith, yet, if he lay not his neck under the yoke of their church's authority, they find evil enough in him to persecute him unto the death.

II. The chief captain's care and conduct stand him in more stead; for when he has thrown this bone of contention between the Pharisees and Sadducees (which set them together by the ears, and gained a fair testimony from the Pharisees), yet he is never the nearer, but is in danger of being pulled in pieces by them — the Pharisees pulling to have him set at liberty, and the Sadducees pulling to have him put to death, or thrown to the people, like Daniel into the den of lions; so that the chief captain is forced to come with his soldiers and rescue him, as he had done, ~~402~~ Acts 21:32, and ~~402~~ Acts 22:24.

1. See here Paul's danger. Between his friends and his enemies he had like to have been pulled to pieces, the one hugging him to death, the other crushing him to death, such violences are those liable to that are eminent, and that are become remarkable, as Paul was, who was by some so much beloved and by others so much maligned.

2. His deliverance: *The chief captain ordered his soldiers to go down from the upper wards, and to take them by force from among them, out of that apartment in the temple where he had ordered the council to meet, and to bring him into the castle, or tower of Antonio; for he saw he could make nothing of them towards the understanding of the merits of his cause.*

III. Divine consolations stood him in most stead of all. The chief captain had rescued him out of the hands of cruel men, but still he had him in custody, and what might be the issue he could not tell. The castle was indeed a protection to him, but withal it was a confinement; and, as it was now his preservation from so great a death, it might be his reservation for a greater. We do not find that any of the apostles or elders at Jerusalem came to him; either they had not courage or they had not admission. Perhaps, in the night following, Paul was full of thoughts and cares what should become of him, and how his present troubles might be turned to answer some good purpose. Then did the Lord Jesus make him a kind visit, and, thought at midnight, yet a very seasonable one (v. 11): *The Lord stood by him*, came to his bed-side, though perhaps it was but a bed of straw, to show him that he was all the day long with him really as sure as he was in the night with him visibly. Note, Whoever is against us, we need not fear if the Lord stand by us; if he undertake our protection, we may set

those that seek our ruin at defiance. *The Lord is with those that uphold my soul*, and then nothing can come amiss.

1. Christ bids him have a good heart upon it: *“Be of good cheer, Paul; be not discouraged; let not what has happened sadden thee, nor let what may yet be before thee frighten thee.”* Note, It is the will of Christ that his servants who are faithful should be always cheerful. Perhaps Paul, in the reflection, began to be jealous of himself whether he had done well in what he said to the council the day before; but Christ, by his word, satisfies him that God approved of his conduct. Or, perhaps, it troubled him that his friends did not come to him; but Christ's visit did itself speak, though he had not said, *Be of good cheer, Paul.*

2. It is a strange argument which he makes use of to encourage him: *As thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.* One would think this was but cold comfort: *“As thou hast undergone a great deal of trouble for me so thou must undergo a great deal more;”* and yet this was designed to encourage him; for hereby he is given to understand,

(1.) That he had been serving Christ as a witness for him in what he had hitherto endured. It was for no fault that he was buffeted, and it was not his former persecuting of the church that was now remembered against him, however he might remember it against himself, but he was still going on with his work.

(2.) That he had not yet finished his testimony, nor was, by his imprisonment, laid aside as useless, but was only reserved for further service. Nothing disheartened Paul so much as the thought of being taken off from doing service to Christ and good to souls: *Fear not*, says Christ, *I have not done with thee*,

(3.) Paul seems to have had a particular fancy, and an innocent one, to go to Rome, to preach the gospel there, though it was already preached, and a church planted there; yet, being a citizen of Rome, he longed for a journey thither, and had designed it (~~Acts~~ Acts 19:21): *After I have been at Jerusalem, I must also see Rome.* And he had written to the Romans some time ago *that he longed to see them*, ~~Romans~~ Romans 1:11. Now he was ready to conclude that this had broken his measures, and he should never see Rome; but even in that Christ tells him he should be gratified, since he desired it for the honour of Christ and to do good.

ACTS 23:12-35

A CONSPIRACY AGAINST PAUL

We have here the story of a plot against the life of Paul; how it was laid, how it was discovered, and how it was defeated.

I. How this plot was laid. They found they could gain nothing by popular tumult, or legal process, and therefore have a recourse to the barbarous method of assassination; they will come upon him suddenly, and stab him, if they can but get him within their reach. So restless is their malice against this good man that, when one design fails, they will turn another stone. Now observe here,

1. Who they were that formed this conspiracy. They were *certain Jews* that had the utmost degree of indignation against him because he was the apostle of the Gentiles, v. 12. *And they were more than forty* that were in the design, v. 13. *Lord, how are they increased that trouble me!*

2. When the conspiracy was formed: *When it was day. Satan had filled their hearts* in the night to purpose it, and, as soon as it was day, they got together to prosecute it; answering to the account which the prophet gives of some who *work evil upon their beds, and when the morning is light they practise it*, and are laid under a woe for it, ^{301B}Micah 2:1. In the night Christ appeared to Paul to protect him, and, when it was day, here were forty men appearing against him to destroy him; they were not up so soon but Christ was up before them *God shall help her, and that right early*, ⁴⁶⁵Psalm 46:5.

3. What the conspiracy was. These men *banded together* in a league, perhaps they called it a *holy* league; they engaged to stand by one another, and every one, to his power, to be aiding and assisting to murder Paul. It was strange that so many could so soon be got together, and that in Jerusalem too, who were so perfectly lost to all sense of humanity and honour as to engage in so bloody a design. Well might the prophet's complaint be renewed concerning Jerusalem (^{212D}Isaiah 1:21): *Righteousness has lodged in it, but now murderers*. What a monstrous idea must these men have formed of Paul, before they could be capable of forming such a monstrous design against him; they must be made to believe that he was the worst of men, an enemy to God and religion, and

the curse and plague of his generation; when really his character was the reverse of all this! What laws of truth and justice so sacred, so strong which malice and bigotry will not break through!

4. How firm they made it, as they thought, that none of them might fly off, upon conscience of the horror of the fact, at second thoughts: *They bound themselves under an anathema*, imprecating the heaviest curses upon themselves, their souls, bodies, and families, if they did not kill Paul, and so quickly *that they would not eat nor drink till they had done it*. What a complication of wickedness is here! To design to kill an innocent man, a good man, a useful man, a man that had done them no harm, but was willing to do them all the good he could, was *going in the way of Cain*, and proved them to be of *their father the devil, who was a murderer from the beginning*; yet, as if this had been a small matter,

(1.) They bound themselves to it. To incline to do evil, and intend to do it, is bad; but to engage to do it is much worse. This is entering into covenant with the devil; it is swearing allegiance to the prince of darkness; it is leaving no room for repentance; nay, it is bidding defiance to it.

(2.) They bound one another to it, and did all they could, not only to secure the damnation of their own souls, but of theirs whom they drew into the association.

(3.) They showed a great contempt of the providence of God, and a presumption upon it, in that they bound themselves to do such a thing within so short a time as they could continue fasting, without any proviso or reserve for the disposal of an overruling Providence. When we say, *Tomorrow we will do this or that*, be it ever so lawful and good, forasmuch as *we know not what shall be on the morrow*, we must add, *If the Lord will*. But with what face could they insert a proviso for the permission of God's providence when they knew that what they were about was directly against the prohibitions of God's work?

(4.) They showed a great contempt of their own souls and bodies; of their own souls in imprecating a curse upon them if they did not proceed in this desperate enterprise (what a woeful dilemma did they throw themselves upon! God certainly meets them with his curse if they do go on in it, and they desire he would if they do not!) — and of their own bodies too (for wilful sinners are the destroyers of both) in tying themselves out from the necessary supports of life till they had accomplished a thing which they

could never lawfully do, and perhaps not possibly do. Such language of hell those speak that wish God to damn them, and the devil to take them, if they do not do so and so. *As they love cursing, so shall it come unto them.* Some think the meaning of this curse was, they would either kill Paul, as an Achan, an accursed thing, a troubler of the camp; or, if they did not do it, they would make themselves accursed before God in his stead.

(5.) They showed a most eager desire to compass this matter, and an impatience till was done: not only like David's enemies, *that were mad against him, and sworn against him* (^{143B}Psalm 102:8), but like the servants of Job against his enemy: *O that we had of this flesh! we cannot be satisfied,* (^{138C}Job 31:31. Persecutors are said to *eat up God's people as they eat bread;* it is as much a gratification to them as meat to one that is hungry, (^{140F}Psalm 14:4.

5. What method they took to bring it about. There is no getting near Paul in the castle. He is there under the particular protection of the government, and is imprisoned, not, as others are, lest he should do harm, but lest he should have harm done him; and therefore the contrivance is that the chief priests and elders must desire the governor of the castle to let Paul come to them to the council-chamber, to be further examined (they have some questions to ask him, or something to say to him), and the, in his passage from the castle to the council, they would put an end to all disputes about Paul by killing him; thus the plot was laid, v. 14, 15. Having been all day employed in engaging one another to this wickedness, towards evening they come to the principal members of the great sanhedrim, and, though they might have concealed their mean design and yet might have moved them upon some other pretence to send for Paul, they are so confident of their approbation of this villainy, that they are not ashamed nor afraid to own to them *that they have bound themselves under a great curse, without consulting the priests first whether they might lawfully do it, that they will eat nothing the next day till they have killed Paul.* They design to breakfast the next morning upon his blood. They doubt not but the chief priests will not only countenance them in the design, but will lend them a helping hand, and be their tools to get them an opportunity of killing Paul; nay, and tell a lie for them too, pretending to *the chief captain that they would enquire something more perfectly concerning him,* when they meant no such thing. What a mean, what an ill opinion had they of their priests, when they could apply to them on such an errand as this! And yet, vile as the proposal was which was made to them (for aught that appears), the

priests and elders consented to it, and at the first work, without boggling at it in the least, promised to gratify them. Instead of reproving them, as they ought, for their wicked conspiracy, they bolstered them up in it, because it was against Paul whom they hated; and thus they made themselves partakers of the crime as much as if they had been the first in the conspiracy.

II. How the plot was discovered. We do not find that the plotters, though they took an oath of fidelity, took an oath of secrecy, either because they thought it did not need it (they would every one keep his own counsel) or because they thought they could accomplish it, though it should take wind and be known; but Providence so ordered it that it was brought to light, and so as effectually to be brought to nought. See here,

1. How it was discovered to Paul, v. 16. There was a youth that was related to Paul, *his sister's son*, whose mother probably lived in Jerusalem; and some how or other, we are not told how, *he heard of their lying in wait*, either overheard them talking of it among themselves, or got intelligence from some that were in the ploy: and *he went into the castle*, probably, as he used to do, to attend on his uncle, and bring him what he wanted, which gave him a free access to him and *he told Paul* what he heard. Note, God has many ways of bringing *to light the hidden works of darkness*; though the contrivers of them *dig deep to hide them from the Lord*, he can make a *bird of the air to carry the voice* (²¹⁰⁰Ecclesiastes 10:20), or the conspirators' own tongues to betray them.

2. How it was discovered to the chief captain by the young man that told it to Paul. This part of the story is related very particularly, perhaps because the penman was an eye-witness of the prudent and successful management of this affair, and remembered it with a great deal of pleasure.

(1.) Paul had got a good interest in the officers that attended, by his prudent peaceable deportment. He could call one of the centurions to him, though a centurion was one in authority, that had soldiers under him, and used to call, not to be called to, and he was ready to come at his call (v. 17); and he desired that he would introduce this young man to the chief captain, to give in an information of something that concerned the honour of the government.

(2.) The centurion very readily gratified him, v. 18. He did not send a common soldier with him, but went himself to keep the young man in

countenance, to recommend his errand to the chief captain, and to show his respect to Paul: *“Paul the prisoner (this was his title now) called me to him, and prayed me to bring this young man to thee; what his business is I know not, but he has something to say to thee.”* Note, It is true charity to poor prisoners to act for them as well as to give to them. *“I was sick and in prison, and you went on an errand for me,”* will pass as well in the account as, *“I was sick and in prison, and you came unto me, to visit me, or sent me a token.”* Those that have acquaintance and interest should be ready to use them for the assistance of those that are in distress. This centurion helped to save Paul's life by this piece of civility, which should engage us to be ready to do the like when there is occasion. *Open thy mouth for the dumb,* ~~2108~~ Proverbs 31:8. Those that cannot give a good gift to God's prisoners may yet speak a good word for them.

(3.) The chief captain received the information with a great deal of condescension and tenderness, v. 19. He *took the young man by the hand,* as a friend or father, to encourage him, that he might not be put out of countenance, but might be assured of a favourable audience. The notice that is taken of this circumstance should encourage great men to take themselves easy of access to the meanest, upon any errand which may give them an opportunity of doing good — *to condescend to those of low estate.* This familiarity to which this Roman tribune or colonel admitted Paul's nephew is here upon record to his honour. Let no man think he disparages himself by his humility or charity. He *went with him aside privately,* that none might hear his business, *and asked him, “What is it that thou hast to tell me?”* Tell me wherein I can be serviceable to Paul.” It is probable that the chief captain was the more obliging in this case because he was sensible he had run himself into a premunire in binding Paul, against his privilege as a Roman citizen, which he was willing now to atone for.

(4.) The young man delivered his errand to the chief captain very readily and handsomely (v. 20, 21). *“The Jews”* (he does not say who, lest he should invidiously reflect upon *the chief priests and the elders;* and his business was to save his uncle's life, not to accuse his enemies) *“have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul to-morrow into the council,* presuming that, being so short a distance, thou wilt send him without a guard; *but do not thou yield unto them,* we have reason to believe thou wilt not when thou knowest the truth; *for there lie in wait for him of them more than forty me,* who have sworn to be the death of him,

and now are they ready looking for a promised from thee, but I have happily got the start of them.”

(5.) The captain dismissed the young man with a charge of secrecy: *See that thou tell no man that thou hast shown these things unto me*, v. 22. The favours of great men are not always to be boasted of; and not fit to be employed in business. If it should be known that the chief captain had this information brought to him, perhaps they would compass and imagine the death of Paul some other way; “therefore keep it private.”

III. How the plot was defeated: The chief captain, finding how implacable and inveterate the malice of the Jews was against Paul, how restless they were in their designs to do him a mischief, and how near he was to become himself accessory to it as a minister, resolves to send him away with all speed out of their reach. He received the intelligence with horror and indignation at the baseness and bloody-mindedness of these Jews; and seemed afraid lest, if he should detain Paul in his castle here, under ever so strong a guard, they would find some way or other to compass their end notwithstanding, either beating the guards or burning the castle; and, whatever came of it, he would, if possible, protect Paul, because he looked upon it that he did not deserve such treatment. What a melancholy observation is it, that the Jewish *chief priests*, when they knew of this assassination-plot, should countenance it, and assist in it, while a Roman *chief captain*, purely from a natural sense of justice and humanity, when he knows it, sets himself to baffle it, and puts himself to a great deal of trouble to do it effectually!

1. He orders a considerable detachment of the Roman forces under his command to get ready *to go to Caesarea* with all expedition, and to bring Paul thither *to Felix the governor*, where he might sooner expect to have justice done him than by the great sanhedrim at Jerusalem. I see not but the chief captain might, without any unfaithfulness to the duty of his place, have set Paul at liberty, and given him leave to shift for his own safety, for he was never legally committed to his custody as a criminal, he himself owns *that nothing was laid to his charge worthy of bonds* (v. 29), and he ought to have had the same tenderness for his liberty that he had for his life; but he feared that this would have incensed the Jews too much against him. Or perhaps, finding Paul to be a very extraordinary man, he was proud to have him his prisoner, and under his protection; and the mighty parade with which he sent him off intimates as much. *Two centurions*, or

captains of the hundreds, are employed in this business, v. 23, 24. They must *get ready two hundred soldiers*, probably those under their own command, *to go to Caesarea*; and with these *seventy horse, and two hundred spearmen* besides, which some think were the *chief captain's* guards; whether they were horse or foot is not certain, most probably foot, as pikemen for the protection of the horse. See how justly God brought the Jewish nation under the Roman yoke, when such a party of the Roman army was necessary to restrain them from the most execrable villanies! There needed not all this force, there needed not any of it, to keep Paul from being rescued by his friends; ten times this force would not have kept him from being rescued by an angel, if it had pleased God to work his deliverance that way, as he had sometimes done; but,

(1.) The chief captain designed hereby to expose the Jews, as a headstrong tumultuous people, that would not be kept within the bounds of duty and decency by the ordinary ministers of justice, but needed to be awed by such a train as this; and, hearing how many were in the conspiracy against Paul, he thought less would not serve to defeat their attempt.

(2.) God designed hereby to encourage Paul; for, being thus attended, he was not only kept safely in the hands of his friends, but out of the hands of his enemies. Yet Paul did not desire such a guard, any more than Ezra did (^{<B2>}Ezra 8:22), and for the same reason, because he trusted in God's all-sufficiency; it was owing, however, to the governor's own care. But he was also made considerable; thus his *bonds in Christ* were made manifest all the country over (^{<B3>}Philippians 1:13); and, soon great an honour having been put upon them before by the prediction of them, it was agreeable enough that they should be thus honourably attended, *that the brethren in the Lord might wax the more confident by his bonds*, when they saw him rather guarded as the patriot of his country than guarded against as the pest of his country, and so great a preacher made so great a prisoner. When his enemies hate him, and I doubt his friends neglect him, then does a Roman tribune patronise him, and carefully provide,

[1.] For his ease: *Let them provide beasts, that they may set Paul on*. Had his Jewish persecutors ordered his removal by *habeas corpus* to Caesarea, they would have made him run on foot, or dragged him thither in a cart, or on a sledge, or have horsed him behind one of the troopers; but the chief captain treats him like a gentleman, though he was his prisoner, and orders him a good horse to ride upon, not at all afraid that he should ride away.

Nay, the order being that they should provide, not a beast, but beasts, to set Paul on, we must either suppose that he was allowed so great a piece of state as to have a led horse, or more, that if he did not like one he might take to another; or (as some expositors conjecture) that he had beasts assigned him for his friends and companions, as many as pleased to go along with him, to divert him in his journey, and to minister to him.

[2.] For his security. They have a strict charge given them by their commander in chief *to bring him safely to Felix the governor*, to whom he is consigned, and who was supreme in all civil affairs among the Jews, as this chief captain was in military affairs. The Roman historians speak much of this Felix, as a man of mean extraction, but that raised himself by his shifts to be governor of Judea, in the execution of which office, Tacitus, *Hist. 5*, says this of him: *Per omnem saevitiam ac libidinem jus regium servili ingenio exercuit* — *He used royal power with a servile genius, and in connection with all the varieties of cruelty and lust*. To the judgement of such a man as this is poor Paul turned over; and yet better so than in the hands of *Ananias the high priest!* Now, a prisoner, thus upon his deliverance by course of law, ought to be protected as well as a prince.

2. The chief captain orders, for the greater security of Paul, that he be taken away *at the third hour of the night*, which some understand of three hours after sun-set, that, it being now after *the feast of pentecost* (that is, in the midst of summer), they might have the cool of the night to march in. Others understand it of *three hours after midnight, in the third watch, about three in the morning*, that they might have the day before them, and might get out of Jerusalem before Paul's enemies were stirring, and so might prevent any popular tumult, and leave them to roar when they rose, like a lion disappointed of his prey.

3. *He writes a letter to Felix the governor* of this province, by which he discharges himself from any further care about Paul, and leaves the whole matter with Felix. This letter is here inserted *totidem verbis* — *verbatim*, v. 25. It is probable that Luke the historian had a copy of it by him, having attended Paul in this remove. Now in this epistle we may observe,

(1.) The compliments he passes upon *the governor*, v. 26. He is *the most excellent governor Felix*, this title being given him of course, his excellency, etc. He sends him *greeting*, wishes him all health and prosperity; may he rejoice, may he ever rejoice.

(2.) The just and fair account which he gives him of Paul's case:

[1.] That he was one that the Jews had a pique against: *They had taken him, and would have killed him;* and perhaps Felix knew the temper of the Jews so well that he did not think much the worse of him for that, v. 27.

[2.] That he had protected him because he was a Roman: "When they were about to kill him, *I came with an army*, a considerable body of men, *and rescued him;*" which action for a citizen of Rome would recommend him to the Roman governor.

[3.] That he could not understand the merits of his cause, nor what it was that made him so odious to the Jews, and obnoxious to their ill-will. He took the proper method to know: he *brought him forth into their council* (v. 28), to be examined there, hoping that, either from their complaints or his own confession, he would learn something of the ground of all this clamour, but he found *that he was accused of questions of their law* (v. 29), about *the hope of the resurrection of the dead*, v. 6. This chief captain was a man of sense and honour, and had good principles in him of justice and humanity; and yet see how slightly he speaks of another world, and the great things of that world, as if that were a question, which is of undoubted certainty, and which both sides agreed in, except the Sadducees; and as if that were a question only *of their law*, which is of the utmost concern to all mankind! Or perhaps he refers rather to the question about their rituals than about their doctrinals, and the quarrel he perceived they had with him was for lessening the credit and obligation of their ceremonial law, which he looked upon as a thing not worth speaking of. The Romans allowed the nations they conquered the exercise of their own religion, and never offered to impose theirs upon them; yet, as conservators of the public peace, they would not suffer them, under colour of their religion, to abuse their neighbours.

[4.] That thus far he understood that there was *nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds*, much less proved or made out against him. The Jews had, by their wickedness, made themselves odious to the world, had polluted their own honour and profaned their own crown, had brought disgrace upon their church, their law, and their holy place, and then they cry out against Paul, as having diminished the reputation of them; and was this a crime *worthy of death or bonds*?

(3.) His referring Paul's case to Felix (v. 30): “*When it was told me that the Jews laid wait for the man, to kill him, without any legal process against him, I sent straightaway to thee, who art the most proper person to head the cause, and give judgment upon it, and let his accusers go after him, if they please, and say before thee what they have against him, for, being bred a soldier, I will never pretend to be a judge, and so farewell.*”

4. Paul was accordingly conducted to Caesarea; the soldiers got him safely out of Jerusalem by night, and left the conspirators to consider whether they should eat and drink or no before they had killed Paul; and, if they would not repent of the wickedness of their oath as it was against Paul, they were now at leisure to repent of the rashness of it as it was against themselves; if any of them did starve themselves to death, in consequence of their oath and vexation at their disappointment, they fell unpitied. Paul was conducted to *Antipatris*, which was seventeen miles from Jerusalem, and about the mid-way to Caesarea, v. 31. Thence *the two hundred foot-soldiers, and the two hundred spearmen, returned* back to Jerusalem, to their quarters in *the castle*; for, having conducted Paul out of danger, there needed not strong a guard, but *the horsemen* might serve to bring him to Caesarea, and would do it with more expedition; this they did, not only to save their own labour, but their master's charge; and it is an example to servants, not only to act obediently according to their masters' orders, but to act prudently, so as may be most for their masters' interest.

5. He was delivered into the hands of Felix, as his prisoner, v. 33. The officers *presented the letter, and Paul with it, to Felix*, and so discharged themselves of their trust. Paul had never affected acquaintance or society with great men, but with the disciples, wherever he came; yet Providence overrules his sufferings so as by them to give him an opportunity of witnessing to Christ before great men; and so Christ had foretold concerning his disciples, *that they should be brought before rulers and kings for his sake, for a testimony against them,* ~~Mark~~ Mark 13:9. The governor enquired of *what province* of the empire the prisoner originally was, and was told *that he was a native of Cilicia*, v. 34; and,

(1.) He promises him a speedy trial (v. 35): “*I will hear thee when thine accusers have come, and will have an ear open to both sides, as becomes a judge.*”

(2.) He ordered him into custody, that he should *be kept a prisoner in Herod's judgment-hall*, in some apartment belonging to that palace which

was denominated from Herod the Great, who built it. There he had opportunity of acquainting himself with great men that attended the governor's court, and, no doubt, he improved what acquaintance he got there to the best purposes.