

Abounding Grace Christian Church

The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Church – Part 70

I. Exposition of Chapter Twenty Three (Continued).

A. Verses 12-15 – More than Forty Assassins Plot to kill Paul.

1. The word “oath” means; “to invoke divine harm if what is said is not true or if one does not carry out what has been promised—‘to curse.’”¹ In other words these men were determined to either kill Paul or be cursed, which means “divine harm” would come upon them. Grant Osborne states:

“When they add their determination not to partake of any sustenance until the deed is done, they say in effect, ‘Either he dies or we die.’ They also are committed to kill Paul sooner rather than later. This is a very dangerous plot, for the Romans have committed to protect Paul, and anyone who tries to thwart their will is likely going to die in the attempt.”²

2. These men were zealous but they were not zealous “...according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2).

3. **Verses 14-15** – They told the chief priests and elders what their plot was. Apparently, they were confident that their religious leaders would not object but would actually be willing to help them. Warren Wiersbe asserts:

“But the forty fasting men and the scheming religious leaders had forgotten that Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, and that the exalted Lord was watching from heaven. At Paul’s conversion, the Lord had told him that he would suffer, but He had also promised that He would deliver him from his enemies (Acts 9:15–16; 26:16–17). Paul held on to that promise all of his life, and God was faithful.”³

4. We can count on the faithfulness of God. (cf. I Corinthians 10:13; I John 1:9).

“Through the LORD’s mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.” – Lamentations 3:22-23.

B. Verses 16-22 – Paul’s nephew discovers the Plot.

1. This is the only mention of any of Paul’s family in the Bible. Many scholars believe that, due to his conversion to Christianity, his family disowned him. This incident suggests that there was still some connection. F.F.

Bruce makes some interesting comments:

“Who was Paul’s nephew, who received such prompt news of the plot? How did he get to know of it so promptly? It is unlikely that he was present when it was hatched, although it would be possible to construe the Greek text in this sense (this would imply that the conspirators assumed that Paul’s relatives were his bitterest opponents). When Paul says in Phil. 3:8 that for Christ’s sake he has ‘suffered the loss of all things,’ it is usually inferred (and very reasonably so) that he was disinherited for his acceptance and proclamation of Jesus as Messiah... But it may be that the mother of this young man retained some sisterly affection for Paul, and something of that affection had been passed on to her son... We may wish we knew more, but we do not.”⁴

2. It’s worth noting that there must have been a level of respect for Paul on the part of both the Centurion (verse 17) and even the Commander himself. This is seen in the fact that the Centurion didn’t even hesitate to take Paul’s nephew to the Commander and the Commander didn’t hesitate to receive and listen to Paul’s nephew. This shows the status of having Roman citizenship and the overall manner of behavior in Paul.

C. Verses 23-30 – The Commander’s Response.

1. **Verses 23-24** – **The Commander took this threat very seriously.** Some scholars believe that if a Roman citizen was assassinated under the Commander’s watch, that the Commander would be executed.⁵

- a. **Verse 23-** “...he called two centurions, saying, ‘Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night.’” – This was an amazing amount of soldiers. 470 soldiers all together would certainly be able to quench a little more than 40 assassins. Grant Osborne writes:

¹Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 441.

²Grant R. Osborne, *Acts: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 410.

³Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 496.

⁴F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 494 (PDF).

⁵Stanley M. Horton, *Acts: A Logion Press Commentary* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2001), 370.

“Two centuries of foot soldiers with all the armor, 70 horsemen, 200 spearmen (many translate “bowmen”)—that is 470 hardened soldiers from the greatest army ever assembled. That was a large-enough force to take down a medium-sized town. It was half of a Roman cohort, therefore half of the soldiers stationed in Jerusalem.”⁶

b. **Verse 24 – “...and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor.”** – The fact that Paul was provided “mounts” indicates that there was one for riding and, presumably, at least one more of carrying his belongings (pack horse). Regarding **“Felix the governor”**, he is generally, throughout history, referred to in negative terms. Dr. Bob Utley writes:

“The Roman historian Tacitus (*Histories* 5:9, *Annals* 12:54) called Antonius Felix cruel and lustful. He gained his position through his brother, Pallas (both of whom were freed slaves), who was a close friend to Emperor Claudius. He served as the eleventh procurator of Palestine from A.D. 52–59.”⁷

c. **Verses 25-30 – The Commander’s (Claudius Lysias) letter to Governor Felix.** – This letter was a required document to be sent on when a prisoner was transferred. Dr. Craig Keener states that this would have become part of Paul’s official record.⁸ Several scholars point out that Lysias made himself sound better than what he actually was in terms of his treatment of Paul. Referring to Keener once again, he writes:

“By conflating the rescue in 23:10 with his previous (unintentional) one (21:32–35), Lysias can justify his later claim to Felix to have rescued Paul on the basis of his Roman citizenship (23:27). Lysias trusts Paul not to contradict Lysias’s revised version of events; social codes demanded gratitude for one’s benefactor. Once Lysias has rescued Paul (now for the third time, and the second deliberate time), he need not worry that Paul, whom he recognizes as an honorable person, will embarrass him.”⁹

D. Verses 31-35 – Paul meets Felix.

1. **Verse 31 – “Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought *him* by night to Antipatris.”** – This was a city about 40 miles from Jerusalem and 25 miles from Caesarea.¹⁰

2. **Verse 32 – “The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks.”**

At this point, the 400 soldiers went back to Jerusalem and only the 70 horseman went the rest of the way. Bob Utley tells us why:

“The reason the foot soldiers returned (cf. v. 32) at this point is because (1) this was primarily a Gentile area and (2) the topography was open and flat, so there was little danger of surprise attack.”¹¹

3. **Verses 33-35 – They arrive in Caesarea and Paul is presented to Felix.** – Felix gave Paul a preliminary interview to make sure he was the right authority to be hearing this case. Dr. Thomas Constable writes:

“Felix inquired concerning Paul’s home ‘province’ for the following reason: If Paul had come from an area in the empire that had its own ruler, in addition to a Roman governor, then that local authority had a right to witness the proceedings (cf. Luke 23:6-12). ‘Cilicia’ was not such a place, however, so Felix could deal with Paul himself. He needed to hear the testimony of Paul’s ‘accusers,’ of course. Consequently Felix “kept” Paul in the governor’s palace, ‘Herod’s Praetorium,’ which Herod the Great had built, until those Jews arrived and he could conduct a hearing. The governor’s palace had cells for prisoners. Paul would have been fairly comfortable there, since he was a Roman citizen who had not even been formally charged with a crime.”¹²

E. Concluding Thoughts.

1. Dr. Warren Wiersbe gives some encouraging and comforting thoughts about all of this when he writes:

“We can see now why God used Paul as his great missionary to the Gentiles. His Roman citizenship gave him the protection of the Roman laws and army for one thing, and it also gave him opportunities to witness to the

⁶Osborne, *Acts: Verse by Verse*, 413.

⁷Robert James Utley, *Luke the Historian: The Book of Acts*, vol. Volume 3B, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2003), 257.

⁸Craig S. Keener, *Acts: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2020), 553.

⁹Ibid, 554.

¹⁰Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 62.

¹¹Robert James Utley, *Luke the Historian: The Book of Acts*, vol. Volume 3B, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2003), 257.

¹²Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Acts* (<http://www.soniclight.com>: Sonic Light Publication, 2019), 446-447.

Gentiles. How wonderful it is that God prepares His servants beforehand, even seeing to their birthplace and citizenship!

It is interesting to note that on several crisis occasions, the Lord appeared to Paul to sustain him. During the Jewish attacks at Corinth, Christ assured Paul that He was with him and would give him many converts (18:9–11). Aboard ship, going to Rome, when the storm broke loose, Christ assured Paul that He would not forsake him (27:21–25). We wonder if Paul leaned heavily on Ps. 23:4, ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me.’”¹³

¹³Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), 344.