

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor  
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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
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Acts 23:1-23 (Read vv.1-11) “The God of Comfort”

[Before reading the text, explain the context]. The Romans had intervened to arrest Paul and take him from the mob that was attacking him. Once they found out he was a Roman citizen, they especially needed to justify any reason to continue to hold him. So they asked that the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews, convene to formulate a charge against him and present evidence (22:30). They knew it had to do with their religion, and if Paul had violated Jewish law regarding the temple or some other serious religious offense, they could have allowed him to be tried and convicted in their court.

Intro. Have you ever been discouraged living the Christian life? Have you tried to do the right thing, only to have things turn out badly for you? Well, you are in good company. I believe that even the great Apostle Paul got discouraged from time to time. After all, he faced a lot of persecution and opposition as he sought to live for God and carry out his mission. In Acts 21-23 we have the latest example of such persecution.

Paul is certainly an example of the fact that it is by no means easy to live the dedicated Christian life. There are many reasons for this. One is that it is contrary to our sinful, selfish nature to live for God. Everyone naturally wants to live for self. Another reason is that the devil will oppose you in this task. Peter spoke of “your adversary the devil” in I Peter 5:8. All the power of the devil will seek to turn you away from God. What really makes living for God so difficult is the fact that many people, even your friends and family, will hinder you from serving God. They may call you a religious fanatic or other name to try to deter you from following Christ with great commitment.

Take Jesus for example. Except for his mother Mary, His family did not believe in Him. Many others admitted His greatness but later demanded His crucifixion. His own nation turned against Him. In the hour when it seemed the whole world was rejecting Him, even His disciples forsook Him. For Jesus, serving God meant standing alone. That is difficult, but not impossible.

God is able to encourage us when we face difficulties. In fact, in 2 Cor. 1:3b-4a Paul describes God as “the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation.” Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is called the Comforter. So when you get discouraged about staying true to God, and when you face trouble, I hope you will remember what we learn today from the experiences of Paul in this text of Scripture.

Let’s start off by considering the fact:

## I. WE ALL NEED ENCOURAGEMENT

All of us get discouraged from time to time as troubles come our way. At such times we need some encouragement. And it is great to know that encouragement is available. Paul had reason to be discouraged. He had just been falsely accused and beaten by a mob. He had been arrested. And here in chapter 23 he had to appear before the ruling council of the Jews. They were not likely to give a fair hearing. Who among us could blame Him if he got discouraged in such a situation? So let’s consider why Paul may have needed encouragement at this time in His life.

First, I need to lay the foundation for what led to his discouragement by pointing out:

A. Paul Stayed True to God – Paul said in v.1, “Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.” Paul affirmed his innocence. Not only that, but he claimed he lived with a clear conscience from his young days.<sup>1</sup> By Jewish standards of measuring faithfulness, he had lived a blameless and exemplary life. How many of us can make such a claim? This was a tremendous claim, and yet it was true of Paul. Even when he was persecuting the church, he thought he was doing right and so his conscience was clear.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this shows that conscience alone is not a sufficient guide in moral duty. In chapters 21-22 we see that Paul had brought money to help the poor. He accepted doing a Jewish purification ritual. He was trying to please the Jews, in order to reach them for Christ.

So here was a man who was living right to the best of his understanding. He was among the best of men, fully devoted to God.

B. But Terrible Things Happened to Him – He had been falsely accused, caught and beaten by a mob. Then, he ended up in prison! His freedom to serve as a missionary had been taken away. So here we see that bad things can indeed happen to good people!

There will be times when you are really trying to live for the Lord, but things still seem to go wrong. Well it’s normal to feel down and discouraged at such times.

Something else that caused him to be discouraged was:

C. His Message Seemed Ineffective – Though Paul had good success among the Gentiles, he had little success among his Jewish people. When he addressed the mob, he initially gained their attention but was soon rejected (22:22-23). His mission to Jerusalem seemed to end in failure. Few if any Jews were converted. That had to have made Paul feel bad.

Let me tell you why else Paul could have become discouraged:

D. He Couldn’t Get a Fair Hearing – In chapter 23 Paul was brought before the council to determine exactly what he had done, and whether it was an offence for which a Roman citizen could be legally punished (vv.1-10). Paul could have known that he wasn’t going to get a friendly or fair opportunity for his defense. Shortly after he began his defense, the High Priest ordered that he be smitten upon the mouth. The rudeness of the high priest is appalling. Jewish law presumed a person innocent until proven guilty by at least 2 or 3 witnesses (Dt. 19:15-20; Numbers 35:30). But Paul had not even been properly charged of a crime! So stung by the injustice of what Ananias had ordered,<sup>3</sup> the apostle responded at once with the warning, “God is about to strike you you whitewashed wall.” Jesus had compared the religious leaders to white washed sepulchers. In his robes he looked pious and holy, but Paul knew that such an unjust man was not clean within. Sure enough, within 10 years, Ananias had to flee to Herod's palace, his house was burned, and he died violently at the hands of Jewish rebels who did not like his pro-Roman stand.

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<sup>1</sup> This is consistent with what he said elsewhere (24:16; Phil. 3:6).

<sup>2</sup> Jesus said in John 16:2, "They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service."

<sup>3</sup> After all, Paul said in the last of v.3, “For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?”

When Paul was informed that he had thus spoken to the High Priest, he apologized with a quotation from Scripture.<sup>4</sup> Though Paul had no respect for Ananias the man (as well as many others), he was bound to respect his office. In the same way David had refused to harm Saul the king, though he had ample grounds for doing so, because he was anointed by God as king.

I believe that biblical principle should apply today. Paul believed he should live by the law quoted in the last of v.5, “You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.” That is based on Ex. 22:28, “You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.” In Jude 1:8 he spoke of false teachers who “reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries.” (Cf. Rom. 13:7; 1 Peter 2:17b). When Barack Obama was president, I did not agree with a number of his policies, especially abortion, but I sought to refrain from speaking evil of him but respect the office he held. The same respect should be given President Trump, especially from God-fearing Christians!

Paul was very wise. In sizing up the situation, I believe Paul realized that he could not get a fair hearing. And he knew that if the Council agreed upon a religious charge, the Roman authorities would likely turn him over to them for a trial based on Jewish law. He was willing to suffer for Christ, but not unnecessarily. To avoid a Jewish trial, he sought to split the council so that they couldn't even agree on a charge. (Divide and conquer is an old, effective method.) So he said in the last of v.6, “Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!” The announcement had the desired effect. Instantly the rift between the “fundamentalists” and the “liberals” became evident. The Pharisees were ready to acquit him, granting the possibility that an angel or spirit had appeared to him, and he was simply obeying that spirit from God (22:17-18). The Sadducees, of course, repudiated the very possibility that such communication could be made. They were liberal and worldly in their views and sought to appease Rome. So the assembly was very much divided, and a loud, heated debate ensued. The Roman authorities had no choice but to take Paul back to prison, for his own protection.

So what is my point? He was still hurting from the beating he had received. Paul won no converts from the mob. He won no true converts from the Sanhedrin. His efforts to win his Jewish people to Christ ended in failure. Some of Paul's worst apprehensions of what might happen to him at Jerusalem looked like they were being fulfilled. He was being falsely accused by his Jewish “brethren.” He was probably facing a long imprisonment, or even death. Also, what had happened to his plans for carrying the gospel to the far west, and visiting Rome on the way? He might well have been dejected and despondent after the events of these two days. Did he feel, as some of us feel, that he had been forgotten of God? But notice:

## II. THE LORD GIVES ENCOURAGEMENT

When you have a need for comfort and encouragement, we have a God who is ready to minister comfort to His children. First, He does so:

A. By His Presence – In v.11 we read, “But the following night the Lord stood by him....” Concerning a later imprisonment, Paul wrote in 2 Tim. 4:16-17, “At my first defense no man stood with me... Notwithstanding, the Lord stood with me and strengthened me....” Did any of the Jewish

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<sup>4</sup> The commentaries give various explanations as to why he did not recognize Ananias. The traditional reason given was his bad eye sight. Yet since this was not a regular meeting of the Sanhedrin, the high priest was likely not in his usual seat or wearing his robes of office. Also, because Paul had visited Jerusalem only sporadically during the previous twenty years and Ananias had become high priest in A.D. 48, about ten years before these incidents, Paul would not have known and recognized him (Fernando).

Christians try to come to Paul's defense? Probably not. But yet the Lord came and stood by him, just as He promised in the Great Commission, "Lo, I am with you all the days, even to the end of the age." A little line that we all should remember is this: You stand for God, and He will stand by you!

So when you get discouraged, seek an awareness of the abiding presence of the Lord. Also, when someone is troubled and discouraged, often the best thing you can do is simply be with that person. You don't need to say much; just spend some time with them, and it will mean a lot.

He also encouraged Paul:

B. By His Words - The Lord has a good word for us when we are down. He told Paul in v.11, "Be of good cheer" (*tharseo*). Jesus had said that several times to those He was about to heal or help (Mt. 9:2, 22; 14:27; Mk. 6:50; Lk. 8:48, etc.). It is human to feel down and discouraged when things are going badly, but God wants us to be able to rejoice in anticipation of what God is going to do to help us or comfort us. Paul learned to practice joy in the midst of trials. He wrote from prison in Phil. 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice." Now how can we rejoice, and be of good cheer, when we are troubled? We can be of good cheer because of:

1. Our Lord's Previous Words of Encouragement – Turn in your Bibles to John 16. Paul should have been familiar with some words of encouragement that Jesus had already given in vv.20, 22, 33b. In v.20 He said, "Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament...; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy." In v.22 He said, "Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you." Then in the last of v.33 He said, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." In all 3 of these verses, Jesus acknowledges the sorrow and tribulation that they were facing. Jesus did not protect them from facing sorrow, and He has never promised that He would. But He assures us that we can have joy even in the midst of sorrow (v.20), and no one can take that joy away (v.22). In the last of v.33 we can see one basis for this joy. We are assured ultimate victory no matter what comes our way. Furthermore, in v.33 we see that not only can we have joy, but also the peace of God.

When you are discouraged by the troubles you are facing, one of the best things you can do is turn to the Word of God for comfort. There are many wonderful promises of comfort and hope in the Scriptures.

2. By His Commendation - One of the best ways to encourage someone is to commend them for the good that they have done. Paul had been faithful in witnessing for the Lord in Jerusalem, and the Lord commended him for it. He said in v.11, "you have testified for Me in Jerusalem...." Once again, Paul had been faithful to testify of the Lord, and the Lord commended him for it. Wouldn't you like for the Lord to commend you?

3. By His Promise – The Lord said in the last of v.11, "you must also bear witness at Rome." Thus, the Lord assured him that he would not die at this time; instead, he would testify of Christ in Rome itself. Faithful witnessing is rewarded by further opportunities for witnessing. And really, that is what was most encouraging. He was cheered, not by being told that his enemies' attacks would be in vain, but that there was work still for him to do. Phil. 1:12 says, "...the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." Therefore, Paul could rejoice even in the midst of his trials.

Once a doctor was dealing with a patient who was nervous about an ear operation. He tried to comfort his patient by saying, "This may hurt you, but it will not injure you." Yes, God

acknowledges the hurt, but nothing shall come upon the child of God that will bring ultimate harm to us.

We too, should follow the example of the Lord and minister encouragement whenever it is needed. I Thess. 1:3-4 says that we receive comfort from God that we may be able to comfort others. Heb. 3:13 says, “But exhort one another daily....”

### III. WE SEE THE BASIS OF HIS ENCOURAGEMENT

The apostle needed this assurance from a heavenly source, for in vv.12-15 things were going from bad to worse if you take God out of the equation. Paul’s enemies lost no time in concocting a plot designed to end his life. This was because they saw in Paul the gravest danger to the continuance of Judaism in its exclusive form. And they realized that they probably wouldn’t succeed in convicting Paul of a crime in a Roman court. Regardless, they were not going to wait for the wheels of justice to slowly turn. They were going to take matters in their own hands. They showed their seriousness by putting themselves under an oath, really a curse (*anathema*); in other words, they were inviting God to destroy them if they failed to fulfill their pledge to kill Paul. It’s amazing what people will do in the name of religion! (Cf. Jn. 16:2). This sounds like today’s Muslim terrorists. Furthermore, they promised not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. That’s high motivation! It seemed with such determination by over 40 men, Paul was surely a dead man.<sup>5</sup> They were going to ask that Paul be brought back to the Sanhedrin and they were going to ambush him along the way.

Yet Christ had promised Paul that he would testify in Rome. So notice what the Lord did:

A. He Helped Him Providentially - When we speak of God’s providential care, we mean God’s unseen interference in the affairs of men. After all, He is on the throne. He is King of kings and Lord of lords! There is no mention of the Lord in vv.16-22, and yet we can know that God was working behind the scenes to make sure His servant Paul was protected from their plans of murder. In the providence of God, He saw to it that Paul’s nephew was in the right place at the right time to hear of the plot. He even had access to Paul and the Roman commander.<sup>6</sup> An unbeliever would see this merely as a coincidence, yet a person of faith sees this as the providence of God.

This is similar to the Old Testament book of Esther. God providentially protected His people from destruction by placing Esther, a Jew, as the Queen of a Gentile King. She intervened on behalf of her people when they faced extermination.

So here also God overruled the plot in such a way that Paul was moved one stage nearer Rome, in accordance with His promise (v.11). Paul was immortal ‘till his work was done.

Listen, God can providentially protect you as well. Put your trust in Him.

But notice that God expected Paul to act wisely in this situation. He did not say, “In spite of this plot, God will protect me, and I will just sit here and wait.” No, he asked for a meeting between his nephew and the captain. Though God can intervene miraculously, often it is His will to work through circumstances and people. And He expects us to use a little common sense to protect ourselves from danger.

B. He Did It Powerfully – After the plot was revealed to the commander, we read in vv.23-24, “he called for two centurions, saying, ‘Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and

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<sup>5</sup> By the way, these men must have become rather hungry, for it was about 9 years before the apostle was put to death!

<sup>6</sup> Since Paul was an unconvicted Roman citizen, he had to be treated with due respect.

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.” Paul wrote and believed Rom. 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Though the plot was bad and evil, God turned it for good. He used it to provide Paul with an armed escort out of the city. What a great escort Paul had! 470 Roman soldiers, all to protect this Christian servant of God! You never would have imagined that this would have happened. This shows the lengths to which the Romans would go to protect a citizen of the Empire, even if he were a Jew. As a result, several of the books of our Bible were written while Paul was in prison, awaiting his appeal to Caesar. Ultimately, Paul did make it to Rome, and preached the gospel there, and was eventually acquitted.

Here we see that God is the ultimate Ruler in the affairs of men. God is in control.

The Protestant reformer Bernard Gilpin, falsely accused of heresy, set out for London for trial. His favorite maxim was, “All things are for the best.” On his journey, he broke his leg. “Is all for the best now?” jested a scornor. “I still believe so,” he replied. And so it proved, for before he was able to resume his journey, the Protestant persecutor Queen Mary died. And instead of going to London to be burned, he returned home in triumph. God can indeed use bad circumstances for our good.<sup>7</sup>

Conclusion: So the next time you feel down and discouraged, I hope you will remember what God did for the apostle Paul. And remember, God loves you too. He promises to be with you at all times. He will never leave you or forsake you.

Now God isn’t likely to speak to you in the same way He spoke to Paul, but He will speak to you through His Word. So turn to the Word of God, where you will find many promises of God to bring comfort to your soul. And remember, God is still on the throne. He can work by His providence to protect you, and to help you through the trials you are facing. So just trust God, and He will comfort and encourage your heart in your time of need. So when you get down and discouraged, look to God, and you will soon be of good cheer. The gloom of the darkness will give way to the light of God’s comfort and encouragement.

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Lee Tan, Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: #6846 (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979) [Illus.#C-1907].