

Acts 23:12-35

Paul Before the Council

Learning Objectives

- Recognize God's orchestration of worldly circumstances to accomplish His purposes
- Observe and apply Paul's experiences through the lenses of earthly and heavenly citizenship

Previously In Acts

In the previous passage of Acts, Paul testified before the Council (also known as the Sanhedrin, or the supreme Jewish court), proclaiming Jesus' resurrection from the dead. This statement divided the assembly and kept them from deciding on Paul's guilt, prolonging his stay in prison. Shortly afterward, "the Lord stood at [Paul's] side and said, 'Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to my cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.'" In this week's passage, we will begin to see God act to bring this promise to fruition.

Acts 23:12-22 (NIV)

¹² The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³ More than forty men were involved in this plot. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here."

¹⁶ But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

¹⁷ Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." ¹⁸ So he took him to the commander.

The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you."

¹⁹ The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?"

²⁰ He said: "Some Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. ²¹ Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request."

²² The commander dismissed the young man with this warning: "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me."

? Given the context from earlier chapters in Acts, as well as the treatment of Jesus in the book of Luke, why do you think that this group of Jews felt so compelled to kill Paul?

Possible Answer: These were Jews who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah. They believed that Paul was spreading sacrilegious teachings and needed to be stopped to preserve the Jewish faith.

? What sequence of events led to Paul being saved from the plot to murder him, and what was significant about the individual who relayed the saving message (other than just his relationship to Paul)?

Possible Answer: Paul's nephew had to be in the right place at the right time to overhear the plot, and he also had to have access to Paul in the barracks to warn him. Because of his Roman citizenship, Paul's nephew had the privilege of speaking with Paul and warning him of the impending ambush. Although, even after he had been given access, the centurion still needed to agree to take him to his commander, and his commander also had to ultimately agree to listen and act. Paul's nephew was given privileges based on his citizenship that non-Romans likely would not have been.

Acts 23:23-35

²³ Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. ²⁴ Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix."

²⁵ He wrote a letter as follows:

²⁶ Claudius Lysias,
To His Excellency, Governor Felix:
Greetings.

²⁷ This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. ²⁸ I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. ²⁹ I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. ³⁰ When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him.

³¹ So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris. ³² The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. ³³ When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him. ³⁴ The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, ³⁵ he said, "I will hear your case when your accusers get here." Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.

? The centurion oversees 1,000 men, and he sends nearly half of them to accompany Paul, a low-ranking prisoner. Why would the commander send so many men to protect Paul?

Possible Answer: These soldiers were all sent to protect Paul because of his Roman citizenship. Because of the looming plot to kill him, the commander took precautions to ensure that Paul would not be harmed as he was transported to the governor.

? What does the commander's letter tell us about the differences between Roman and Jewish authority?

Possible Answer: The letter shows us that Roman leaders clearly wielded more power and authority than their Jewish counterparts. The Romans were content to let the Jews run their own courts as long as this practice did not unnecessarily harm their own citizens. As a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to due process, and as a Roman ruler who was ignorant of Jewish beliefs, the commander acknowledged and acted upon his presumption that there was no legitimate reason to imprison or kill Paul.

In the previous chapter of Acts, Paul made an appeal to the Jews because of his Jewish citizenship (Acts 22:1-5 (NIV)):

¹ "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense."

² When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

Then Paul said: ³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

? In Chapter 23, the Jews are far less willing to provide for Paul based on his citizenship than the Romans are. Why is this, given Paul's previous status as a high-ranking member of Jewish society?

Possible Answer: Although Paul had been in a position of power, his defection from the Jews' core set of beliefs discredited him. The Romans, who Paul was loosely coupled with because of his birth, had no issue with Paul's belief in Christ, and were willing to afford him the benefits of his birthright. The Jews on the other hand DID take offense at Paul's belief in Christ, and regardless of his previous standing, wanted him killed at all costs.

? We see in this passage that earthly citizenship provides benefits that are purely circumstantial. How might this situation have played out differently if Paul was still a Pharisee and held a view of Caesar that was radically inappropriate in the eyes of the Romans?

Possible Answer: If Paul were still a Pharisee, held in high regard among his Jewish brothers, but was speaking out openly against Caesar, or any other Roman official, his Roman citizenship would likely have been discounted by the Romans, in the same way his Jewish citizenship was by the Jews. Since the Romans were above the Jews in the chain of command, Paul's Jewish brothers would be able to do little for Paul if the Romans chose to punish him. This example shows the benefits of worldly citizenship are purely circumstantial based on who holds power at the given moment.

? Even though Paul possessed earthly citizenship from both the Jews and the Romans (the latter saving his life in this passage), he consistently depends upon his heavenly citizenship throughout Acts, stemming from his relationship with Christ. Given God's promise to Paul noted in the Read Aloud at the beginning of these materials, how do you see God acting as the great overseer and promise-keeper, utilizing Paul's dual citizenship on earth for his kingdom purposes?

Possible Answer: God is the orchestrator and engineer of Paul's circumstances. Even though Paul identified minimally as a Roman citizen, God used this earthly reality in his plan to save Paul and spread the gospel to the Gentiles. God promises Paul that he would live to testify in Rome and thus brings him through a series of intricately designed events to do so.

? God often chooses to use the circumstances in our lives, both good and bad, for the benefit of us and those around us. In hindsight, can you think of any examples of God using a difficult or seemingly unfair circumstance in your life for good?

Possible Answer: Not getting into your first choice of school, employed in a less-than-ideal work situation, unforeseen illness, etc. God can use us in ANY circumstance if we are willing to bend a knee to his will.

For Discussion and Accountability

? Do you recognize God's sovereignty in your everyday life? How can you do this more consistently this week?

? How can you rest in your citizenship as a member of God's kingdom, finding security and contentment in knowing that he is ultimately above your earthly circumstances?