

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL

## COME LORD JESUS

### GOD’S PRISONER

#### *The Plot Against Paul*

Over the next three months, we will conclude our three-year study of the Gospel Project – Chronological. For the first six weeks we will study Paul’s experiences as a prisoner of Christ which is how he referred to himself in Ephesians and Philemon (*Ephesians 3:1, Philemon 1:1 and 9*). Yes, Paul during his ministry was a physical prisoner placed in confinement by the enemies of His Savior. We don’t know the exact timeframe of his imprisonment but it was most likely between five and six years. However, being ‘God’s prisoner’ was another matter altogether. It began when Paul came face-to-face with the Risen Jesus he had been persecuting. After Paul’s salvation experience, Jesus so captured Paul’s heart that he became a person constrained and confined by Jesus. His love for God directed his heart’s desire to do only what God called him to do. This is why he was able to call himself a prisoner of Christ. By the power of God Paul became a changed man. And, that change caused the hunter of Christians to become the hunted one.

Paul went on at least three missionary journeys. He planned a fourth journey to Spain (*Romans 15:24*). However, there is no evidence in scripture that he ever made that journey. His final journey would lead to Rome.

Our lesson today picks up at the point where Paul has finally returned to Jerusalem where a plot to kill him quickly develops. On the way there, he was warned not to go.

*Read Acts 21:4 (ESV)* <sup>4</sup> *And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.*

Some Bible teachers feel that Paul made a mistake when he went up to Jerusalem since the Holy Spirit spoke through these men at Tyre. Later another warning came when a prophet named Agabus came down to Caesarea. Let’s read what he said.

*Read Acts 21:11 (ESV)* <sup>11</sup> *And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’”*

It is obvious that these godly folks were endowed with gifts that allowed them to foresee the troubles that Paul would face. Therefore, they begged him not to go out of their love for him. But these warnings for Paul from the Spirit did not mean Paul went against the Lord’s will by going to Jerusalem. The warnings were for Paul to be prepared for the trouble to come. Because of his love for the Lord, Paul was compelled to go. He was carrying the offering the Gentile Christians had donated to the suffering saints in Jerusalem. He wanted to present this to

the church family with his own hands instead of a representative delivering the funds. But, Paul's going to Jerusalem went way beyond a money delivery. While in the Roman prison, Paul wrote in ***Philippians 1:12 (ESV)*** <sup>12</sup> *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.* Paul's foremost concern was that the gospel would go forward.

When Paul made it to Jerusalem, we find **Paul is judged for his resurrection hope.**

***Read Acts 23:1-5 (ESV)*** <sup>1</sup> *And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day."* <sup>2</sup> *And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.* <sup>3</sup> *Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?"* <sup>4</sup> *Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?"* <sup>5</sup> *And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"*

Paul was an honest witness for the Lord. He had already been warned by the Spirit of God that trouble was coming but he stood firm when it came. Ananias, the high priest, should not be confused with Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, to whom Jesus was first taken the night he was arrested. The historian, Josephus, depicts Ananias as being one of the very worst high priests known for his extreme cruelty and greed.

Ananias himself broke the law by assuming that Paul was guilty. Having Paul struck on the mouth would indicate that Paul was offending with his lips. I love Paul calling Ananias a whitewashed wall! He was indicating that Ananias was a hypocrite. It is reminiscent of what Jesus said in ***Matthew 23:27 (ESV)*** <sup>27</sup> *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.* Warren Wiersbe says, "Paul did speak prophetically since God did indeed smite this wicked man. When the Jews revolted against Rome in the year 66, Ananias had to flee for his life because of his known sympathies with Rome. The Jewish guerrillas found him hiding in an aqueduct at Herod's palace, and they killed him."

When Paul discovered that Ananias was truly the high priest he apologized. Commentators over the years have developed different ideas regarding why Paul did not recognize the high priest. Some say that Paul did not know who the high priest was. Or perhaps Paul was speaking in holy sarcasm: "Could such a man actually be the high priest?" Since this was an informal meeting of the council, perhaps the high priest was not wearing his traditional garments and sitting in his usual place. For that matter, Paul had been away from the Jewish religious scene for many years and probably did not know many people in the council. The main point to remember is that Paul made an apology based on God's Word. ***Exodus 22:28 (ESV)*** <sup>28</sup> *"You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.* We currently are living in a time when speaking evil of those in power has become commonplace and Christians need to remember that we should not speak evil of our rulers. We should pray for them. In order to take the focus off himself, Paul brought up a contentious issue, that is the resurrection.

***Read Acts 23:6-10 (ESV)*** <sup>6</sup> *Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial."* <sup>7</sup> *And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the*

*Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. <sup>8</sup> For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. <sup>9</sup> Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, "We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?" <sup>10</sup> And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.*

The Sadducees and the Pharisees – what do we know about them? They were normally at cross purposes against each other but they united forces against Jesus and His followers. The Sadducees disregarded all the traditions and unwritten laws which the Pharisees prized so highly. The Sadducees were 'freethinkers' and were not as acceptable to the people as the Pharisees. The Pharisees were rigid interpreters of the letter of the Mosaic law, but often violated the spirit of the Law. The Pharisees believed in resurrection but not the resurrection of Jesus. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, they didn't believe in resurrection. They believed when you die it is over. And Paul's remark concerning the hope of the resurrection set off a firestorm between the two groups.

In this ongoing argument between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, it is easy to be reminded of the dead-end arguments between today's conservatives and liberals. *1 Timothy 2:1-2 (ESV) <sup>1</sup> First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, <sup>2</sup> for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.*

### **Paul is strengthened through the Lord's presence.**

*Read Acts 23:11 (ESV) <sup>11</sup> The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."*

There is a line from a song that says, "Jesus knows all about our struggles." Jesus certainly knew all about Paul's struggles. He too had stood before the Sanhedrin. To me this is a proof verse that Paul was not out of the Lord's will when he went to Jerusalem. In this verse, we find the Lord approving Paul's witness in Jerusalem. From a human standpoint, it would be easy to conclude that Paul had failed in his mission but the Lord was pleased and that was what mattered. The current situation made it look as though Paul's desire to go to Rome would not be fulfilled. Now, Jesus affirmed that he would. Paul was not going to die by the evil ones in Jerusalem. Paul gloried in Christ's encouragement. He would write in *Romans 8:31 (ESV) <sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*

### **Paul is preserved through surprising circumstances.**

*Read Acts 23:12-15 (ESV) <sup>12</sup> When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. <sup>13</sup> There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. <sup>14</sup> They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. <sup>15</sup> Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to*

*you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near.”*

Here are over 40 men plotting to kill Paul. The assassination plot indicates that the evidence against Paul was worthless in a court of law. And, just like in the movies where the hero triumphs even in a desperate situation, the plot is discovered by someone who cares about Paul and is willing to assist him.

**Read Acts 23:16-21 (ESV)** <sup>16</sup> Now the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. <sup>17</sup> Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him.” <sup>18</sup> So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, “Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you.” <sup>19</sup> The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?” <sup>20</sup> And he said, “The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. <sup>21</sup> But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent.”

Up until this time, we didn’t know that Paul had a sister or nephew but he did. We don’t know if they lived in Jerusalem or were just visiting. We don’t know if they were Christians or estranged from Paul because of his faith. Possibly Paul had never even met this young relative. All we know is that the Lord sent Paul the help that he needed at the right time. The scripture says that the nephew was a young man. The tribune taking him by the hand indicates to me that he was most likely a youngster.

**Read Acts 23:22-24 (ESV)** <sup>22</sup> So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, “Tell no one that you have informed me of these things.” <sup>23</sup> Then he called two of the centurions and said, “Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. <sup>24</sup> Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor.”

In a later verse the tribune identifies himself as Claudius Lysias. How did he know the boy was even telling the truth? Paul had already caused Claudius so much trouble that it might be a relief to get rid of him! But, Claudius did the right thing.

Throughout the Book of Acts, Roman military officers, beginning with Cornelius and ending with Julius treated Paul well. There is no record in Acts of official Roman persecution against the church; the opposition was instigated by the unbelieving Jews. While the Empire had its share of corrupt political opportunists, for the most part, the military leaders were men of quality who respected the Roman law.

Claudius' plan was simple and wise. He knew that he had to get Paul out of Jerusalem. He would send Paul to Felix, the Roman governor. With just a few men, Paul would have been an easy target for the gang of 40. But God arranged for 470 Roman soldiers to protect Paul – almost half of the men in the temple garrison! Wow! This is a beautiful picture of how our God protects His children. Hallelujah! When God is for us – no one on this earth can be against us!