



# 40 | ACTS 23:12-35

## TRUSTING IN GOD'S PROTECTION

*Let us be active, serving the Lord, knowing that even when we stand alone,  
we are never alone, for the Lord is standing with us!*

### Outline

1. THE DESIGN OF THE ENEMY (23:12-15)  
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The Priests  
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3. THE DESTINATION OF THE APOSTLE (23:31-35)  
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### Call to Worship

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!  
<sup>2</sup> Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, <sup>3</sup> who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, <sup>4</sup> who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, <sup>5</sup> who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. —Psalm 103:1-5

### Songs

*Is He Worthy*

*O Lord, My Rock and My Redeemer*

*Holy, Holy, Holy*

*All Creatures of Our God and King (Sovereign Grace)*

*Jesus Strong and Kind*

### Announcements

**WELCOME:** We are glad you are here! Be sure to grab a Welcome Packet if you are visiting with us.

## Introduction

Sometimes, we feel quite helpless in life. We feel abandoned. If you've not felt that way, you will. But the Lord will never abandon you. He says, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Heb 13:5). If everyone else has left you behind, the Lord will carry you through the flood and through the fire.

*Isaiah 43:1-3* | Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. <sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup> For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Sometimes as believers, we feel forgotten and abandoned. We are kind of like **a special rock** a little boy found that started the first gold rush. It was a precious, large gold nugget. In 1799, twelve-year-old Conrad Reed, skipped his Sunday School class to go fishing, and he found **a massive gold nugget** in Little Meadow Creek in Barrier Mills, North Carolina. His discovery **triggered America's first gold rush**. Not knowing what it was made of his family used it as **a doorstep** for three years. In 1802, his father, John Reed, took it to **a jeweler** who identified it as a lump of gold and offered him **\$3.50**. John took it, not knowing it's actual worth, which was \$3,600 in the 1800s or **\$400K in today's money!** That lump of gold, which was used as a **doorstop for three years** in North Carolina, is one of the biggest gold nuggets ever found east of the Rockies.<sup>1</sup>

We are kind of like that forgotten gold nugget, unappreciated by the world, but **treasured by our heavenly Father**. When you are maltreated on this earth, the Lord loves you. We learn this from the life of the apostle Paul.

Key Thought: When you feel most abandoned, it is then that God carries you and protects you. He treasures you as his child, guiding your every step toward Christlikeness.

At times we feel like that rock, forgotten, unvalued, and unprotected. But the Lord does protect us at all times. There is always a hedge of protection around the child of God.

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## 1. THE DESIGN OF THE ENEMY (23:12-15)

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The enemy's design is to make you feel abandoned by God. Paul might have felt that way. He was under severe attack by the wicked one. He had testified of Christ before the riotous crowd on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. He had appeared before the Sanhedrin. Now he had been taken into Roman custody. While he is waiting, trusting in God, little does he know there are 40 assassins plotting to kill him. Yet Paul is perfectly safe. We can say with missionary John Paton:

I am immortal till my Master's work with me is done.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Hairr and Joey Powell, *Gold Mines in North Carolina* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> John Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2018), 207.

Don't be afraid of the design of the enemy. Your steps are predestined by God (Prov 16:9; Eph 2:10). Your life is predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29).

## THE PLEDGE

These forty assassins pledged not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. Notice that even if forty people have pledged themselves to execute the apostle, he is immortal until God is finished with him.

**Acts 23:12-13** | 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.

**Paul was untouchable**, despite those who wanted to kill him because he had God's hedge of protection around him. The assassins had their **pledge, but Paul had God's hedge**. It's like he said of Job.

*Job 1:10* | Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side?

So it is with us. We have God's hedge of protection around us. Who knows how many members of God's angel armies are escorting you right now? **The only way you breach that hedge is through sin**. Remember that Satan is the enemy of your soul. He hates you, and he wants God's plans for you to be defeated. This story reminds us that the safest place for the Christian is the center of God's will. Despite the oath of the forty assassins, Paul was safe in the will of God, as you are.

## THE PRIESTS

It is frightening to know that Satan has his pawns in high places, even in religious circles. Here there is an agreement with the chief priests and elders with this posse of forty assassins.

**Acts 23:14** | 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."

**No matter how high the enemies** are that plot against God's people, they are **not higher than God himself** who watches over his children.

## THE PLOT

Shockingly, the chief priests are in with the Sanhedrin to deceive the Roman commander Lysias who was tribune for Paul.

**Acts 23:15** | "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."

Careless of their own lives, **thinking to do God a service**, these **sophisticated assassins** would rid Judaism of Paul once and for all. The Jewish leaders, however, had to play their part with the Roman military commander. For these religious leaders, **following God was just a cover**. They were controlled by the wicked one. How sad

that these leaders should disgrace themselves with dark plots, lies, and violence. Their **ideas were spawned by the father of lies, he who was a murderer from the beginning.**<sup>3</sup> Paul's enemy was in the unseen realm.

*Ephesians 6:12* | We are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

**Paul's greatest enemy was not the Sanhedrin** or his posse of forty **assassins**. His **chief enemy and yours is the devil**. But remember, Satan cannot touch you without God's permission. All the highest-ranking leaders in Israel want Paul dead, but they cannot make it happen since Paul is immortal until God is finished with him. The same could be said of every one of God's children. Your enemy is already a defeated foe.

*1 John 4:4 (KJV)* | Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.

Satan knows his time is short (Rev 12:12). He's soon going to be put away forever, never to harass the saints again!

*Revelation 20:10* | The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

**Don't give an opportunity for the devil** through sin on your part (Eph 4:27). Walk in holiness and humility. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (Jas 4:7).

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## 2. THE DELIVERANCE OF GOD (23:16-30)

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God uses the most unlikely people to protect his servants. He uses **little David to defeat a giant**. He uses **young Josiah** to turn a nation from idolatry. He uses a **little boy to feed a multitude** with his lunch. He preserved **three Hebrew children** from perishing in a fiery furnace, and there was a fourth man in the fire: the Son of God! God uses the most weak and unlikely people to deliver us. For Paul, God uses **his own nephew, a young boy** who found courage and protected his **Uncle Paul**.

### GOD'S AGENT

It is **Paul's little nephew that God uses** to protect the great apostle. Who knew Paul had a sister or a nephew? We don't know his name or age, but he seems to be just a boy who is at the right place at the right time.

*Acts 23:16-22* | 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

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<sup>3</sup> J. Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, Ac 23:15.

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." <sup>22</sup> So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things."

First of all, Paul's **40 assassins must have either starved** to death or broken their vow, because God wasn't going to let them touch Paul, no matter how intriguing their plot against Paul was. God is going to use a little boy to protect the great apostle.

The boy must have been **quite young**, since the tribune, Commander Lysias, "**took him by the hand**" (23:19) to hear the plot against Paul. The tribune received Paul's nephew graciously, taking him to a quiet spot where he could listen to his story.

**How had the boy gained access** to the Antonia Fortress? It's likely that **Paul welcomed his sister and nephew** there since he was free to have any guests he liked. Paul's status as a Roman citizen stood him in good stead. Although in custody, he was able to receive visitors, and his requests were handled by the centurions.<sup>4</sup>

We don't know how the boy heard about the murder plot against Paul, but it may have been **a rumor that had gotten out**. The boy brought the plot to the Roman commander Lysias, and he insisted he tell no one. His own life would not be worth much if the conspirators found out he had betrayed them to the Romans. The commander dismissed the young man, for he had done his job well!

It's vital that young people serve the Lord at the earliest of ages. Learn from Paul's young nephew that God can do great and mighty things through the youngest of his children. Remember the words of Jesus.

*Matthew 19:14* | Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

Let me **urge the children and young people** of our church to come to Christ now. Don't wait until you are older. It will be harder to come the longer you wait. Come now and trust him so that you have your whole life to serve him. Don't waste your life in sin. Give your heart to Christ and have your sins forgiven! Be a member of God's dear family. Don't ever think you are too young to be saved or to be used mightily by the living God.

## GOD'S ARMY

So after our unlikely agent, this little nephew of Paul's, we have an unlikely army. The **Roman soldiers are now recruited** to protect Paul from this plot of forty assassins. How unusual is the life of a Christian! God can utilize anyone on earth to protect his people. Commander Lysias, the Roman tribune calls his centurions and forms a little army for the apostle Paul.

*Acts 23:23-24* | Then he called two of the centurions and said, "Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go

<sup>4</sup> Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, Ac 23:17-18.

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.”

Two hundred soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen are gathered! **That's 470 Roman soldiers in all!** They go in “the third hour of the night” which is **nine o'clock at night**. Paul was even given a horse to ride. Surrounded by a great army, Paul rode through the night **on his way to Caesarea**.

There was no way Commander Lysias could risk having Paul remain in Jerusalem another night, and he must therefore be escorted to a more secure location—and the jurisdiction of the governor (procurator) of the province of Judea, Tiberius Antonius **Felix**. As Roman procurator, Felix resided in **Caesarea**, **visiting Jerusalem only for the feasts** (to ensure order).<sup>5</sup> So **Paul was on his way with the Roman army** conscripted by God for his humble apostle!

### GOD'S AMBASSADOR

Who does God use to deliver Paul to Caesarea, but **his faithful Commander, General-like leader—a Roman tribune named Claudius Lysias**. He writes a letter to the governor of Palestine at the time, named Felix.

Acts 23:25-30 | And he wrote a letter to this effect: <sup>26</sup> “Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. <sup>27</sup> This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. <sup>28</sup> And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. <sup>29</sup> I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. <sup>30</sup> And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.”

The only way Luke would have direct access to this letter would be **through the trials that the apostle would go through** with various dignitaries and kings. **Luke, it seems was present** when this letter would have been presented. What is clear in the letter, is the way the Roman tribune Claudius Lysias is actually **acting as God's ambassador and lawyer** for Paul.

Isn't it amazing **how God can protect his children**? He can use the most unlikely people to open doors and guide our way. When Abraham gave his wife to Pharaoh's harem, God protected Sarah and spoke directly to Pharaoh in a dream. It was Pharaoh himself that protected Sarah, not Abraham. God is bigger than whatever you can see with your eyes. He can utilize **Pharaohs and donkeys and angels** to protect his people. **You are not alone. You have God's hedge of protection around you.**

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas, *Acts*, 654–655.



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## 3. THE DESTINATION OF THE APOSTLE (23:31-35)

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Perhaps Paul thought that due to seeming exoneration he would be set free. But instead, he's going to start a very long journey of incarceration and eventually imprisonment.

### SAFE PASSAGE

The soldiers ride with Paul as far as Antipatris, the halfway point to Caesarea from Jerusalem. Then the soldiers return back to the barracks of the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem and Paul continues on with the horsemen to Caesarea Maritima by the Mediterranean Sea.

**Acts 23:31-33** | So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris.<sup>32</sup> And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him.<sup>33</sup> When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor [Felix], they presented Paul also before him.

The two hundred soldiers went back to Jerusalem, and the 200 spearman and 70 horsemen guarded Paul and delivered him to Governor Felix. **Two-hundred seventy is still an incredible security detail!**

Despite all the plots and schemes to kill Paul, note here that **Paul is immortal until God is finished** with him. How is that?

*Psalms 4:8* | In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.

*Nahum 1:7* | The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.

Can you testify that the safest place for any of us is in the center of God's will? Are you living in the peace of God, or is fear eating at you? There is legitimate fear that God gives. If you see a lion you should run. But truly, most of our fear is not legitimate. **Most of our fear is a sinful anxiety that is a lack of trust in God.** Dear saint, don't spend one more second in sinful fear. Ask God, where am I not trusting you? God's peace will come as you conquer fear. The Scripture tells us we are not to be sinfully anxious about anything.

*Philippians 4:6-7* | Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Jesus says it's the Gentile unbelievers that worry. They are atheists. They don't trust in God. **Worry makes people into practical atheists.** You forget that God loves you, that he's in control, and that he's guiding all events to a glorious conclusion for your good and his glory. Don't be worrying about anything. The Gentiles worry about all these things.

*Matthew 6:32-33* | Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

You never have to worry if you constantly entrust your soul to God (Pro 3:5-6). **Worry is a toxin of the soul. It can paralyze you.** Don't get comfortable.

## SOUND PREACHING

Governor Felix decides to accept the case, promising to hear from Paul when his accusers arrived from Jerusalem. Paul was a Roman citizen and had not yet been charged with a crime.<sup>6</sup>

*Acts 23:34-35a* | On reading the letter, he [Governor Felix] asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, <sup>35</sup> he said, "I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive."

Paul was going to be able to **preach the gospel to Governor Felix** on many occasions over the course of two years (24:27). Paul would have to wait a long time, but during this time, he would **preach Christ to many dignitaries**. Jesus had said this would happen.

*Matthew 10:17-19* | Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, <sup>18</sup> and you will be **dragged before governors and kings for my sake**, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. <sup>19</sup> When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.

This is basically the story of the apostle Paul's life! The Lord had said of Paul that he was a chosen instrument for the Gentiles.

*Acts 9:15* | The Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."

Now **Paul was going to have plenty of opportunities to preach the gospel to Gentiles and kings**, and even those of Caesar's household (Phil 1:13; cf 4:22).

## SECURE PRISON

Paul would remain under guard in **Herod's beautiful palace** in Caesarea in relative comfort.<sup>7</sup>

*Acts 23:35b* | And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium.

Herod's praetorium was a beautiful palace built by Herod the Great on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in Caesarea. It's a massive palace, and Paul would have been kept with a Roman soldier in one of the rooms day and night. **Every six hours, Paul would get a new Roman soldier to preach to!**<sup>8</sup> That's what I call a **jail ministry!**

<sup>6</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Acts*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2016), 459.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kathryn L. Gleason, et al. "The Promontory Palace at Caesarea Maritima: Preliminary Evidence for Herod's praetorium." *JRA* 11 (1998): 23-52.



Sometimes God's protection is very different than what we would have planned. Paul's desire was to go to Rome and testify there, but this was a very different pathway than anyone would have desired.

**It seemed like Paul's ministry was over.** Have you ever felt that way? The truth is often our **ministry is just beginning after our legacy is completed.** We read Paul's letters of inspired Scripture even to this very day. We are studying his life. Just when perhaps he thought his ministry was ending, it had really hardly begun at all.

**EDWARDS:** I think of Jonathan Edwards, who after many years of faithful service to his congregation in Northampton, was fired on the basis of false reports and slander and exiled from the town. As a result, he went to work among the Indians. He then was asked to be **president of Princeton University.** A week after his installation, he gave himself the smallpox vaccine, and died. Of course today Edwards is regarded as the **foremost theologian of the American continent.**<sup>9</sup>

**SPURGEON:** Or what about C.H. Spurgeon? He was **run out of his church** during the downgrade controversy when his church joined a compromised denomination. It is said that Spurgeon died at a fairly young age of 57 of **a broken heart.** His wife, Susannah, wrote following his death that **"his fight for the faith ... cost him his life."**<sup>10</sup> Yet we read his sermons and enjoy his books to this very day.

Paul was under the watch of a Roman soldier day and night as he waited for what would be two years there in Caesarea near the Mediterranean Sea. Pointless? Not at all. He'd be busy evangelizing kings and governors and the Roman soldiers. Paul was given a new "jailhouse" ministry. What was God doing? He was refining Paul by reinventing his mission field. No longer was he to go to the synagogue or the marketplace. Now it was to the governor's court, the king's palace, and the soldier's jail cell.

#### Conclusion

Paul may have at times felt abandoned, put on the shelf, but he was not. God never puts his saints on the shelf. We will suffer. We will be tried by fire through tests and tribulations. He refines us to make us more useful, **conformed to the image of Christ.** All of our suffering is pushing us toward Christlikeness.

In the 1800s, a group of women met to study the Bible in Dublin, Ireland. They were puzzled by the words of Malachi 3.

*Malachi 3:3 | And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.*

**Why would a refiner sit and watch the silver?** One of the ladies promised to call on a silversmith and report to the group, and she did just that. "Is it true," asked the lady to the silversmith, "that you must sit while the silver is being refined?"

"Oh yes, Madam," replied the silversmith, "I must sit with my eye steadily fixed on the furnace. For **if the time necessary for refining be exceeded in the slightest degree,** the silver will be **ruined.**" The then noted that the way he knew the process of purifying was complete was by **seeing his own image reflected in the silver.** So it is with the Christian. When Christ's image is reflected in us his work of purifying is accomplished.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 376–377.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Susannah Spurgeon, Joseph Harrald, *C.H. Spurgeon's Autobiography: 1878-1892, vol 4* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1900), 255.

<sup>11</sup> A.G. Whittelsey. *Magazine for Mothers and Daughters, Volume 3* (New York: Whittelsey Press, 1852), 33.

So Paul was in the fire. It seemed he was done for. But actually, God was refining him for even greater use. What about you? You're in the fire right now. You can't understand it. You feel put on the shelf. But learn the lessons God is teaching you. Surrender to him, and you will see that he is preparing you for an even greater legacy with greater fruit.