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A0938 – September 20, 2009 – Acts 23:11-35 – The Assassination Plot

Alright, we're in Acts 23, verse 11. If you're wondering when all this happened we're in about the year AD57. So in Acts 20-23 the events all occur in AD57. Let's review chapter 23 to get up to speed. Paul is in Jerusalem and he's been arrested by the Roman Army and he's being kept in the barracks called the Antonia Fortress which sits on the NW corner of the Temple Mount. Today nothing's left of it but archaeological remains and what is in its place is a street called Via Dolorosa, which is the traditional way Jesus walked with the cross, but since the Antonia Fortress was covering that road at the time it's been my position that the Via Dolorosa wasn't there when Christ was crucified and so he did not take that route to the site of crucifixion. The Via Dolorosa would have to be somewhere else and the most logical place Bible scholars suggest is that Jesus was taken in the night to Herod's Palace, also called the Praetorium, which is not the Antonia Fortress. But in any case while Christ probably was not held in the Antonia Fortress, Paul was kept in the Antonia Fortress. And the commander of that fortress, Claudius Lysias, took Paul down for interrogation before the Sanhedrin who probably convened in the outer court of the Temple near the Antonia. That's where Paul gave his that defense we looked at last week. It wasn't much of a defense because it amounts to v 1; in v 2 Ananias cuts him off and has Paul hit, which was a violation of the Mosaic Law. And so what we're seeing is that the Jewish people whom God had given His righteous Law turn out to be lawbreakers and the Romans who were pagans kept law and order. And in this kind of a court atmosphere Paul doesn't want to be judged. Who wants to be judged by a bunch of lawbreakers? So to get out of the investigation Paul raises a theological controversy over resurrection and this sets the Pharisees against the Sadducees and you see a theological war break out in v 9 between these two sects. And in v 10 the Roman commander has to send his

soldiers down to rescue Paul again and bring him back into the Antonia Fortress. So he still hasn't discovered why all the fuss about Paul but Paul is a Roman citizen and he's going to protect Paul until Paul can get a fair trial.

So as Acts finishes out we see more and more that the Jews are a rebellious crooked generation and therefore the re-offer of the kingdom fades out more and more and the Church comes into focus more and more. And this brings us to a critical point in Paul's life where we think he was pretty depressed and every time when Paul gets pretty down the Lord appears to him and that's what's going on with verse 11. **But on the night *immediately* following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.**

Now that verse controls the rest of the Book of Acts. The principle in this verse influences your life, it influences my life and so we want to learn the principle. The principle is that God has a plan for history that is going to come to pass and the only remaining question is how are we adjusting to the plan. Paul can adjust by taking courage and relaxing or he can flip out and run around like a chicken with his head cut off but God's plan will come to pass. So again we see the age old problem of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Christianity doesn't have a problem with this. It's paganism that has a problem. Paganism because it rejects the Creator-creature distinction always holds to the Continuity of Being, only one level of being in which god, if he exists, is on the same level as angels, man, animals, rocks. It all is part of the same reality and therefore we are all subject to the same cause-effect. That's the pagan view and in this view man is a victim and you can take your pick. You can either be the victim of a chance universe in which anything can happen, (all is chaos in which case it doesn't matter what choices you make) or you can be the victim of deterministic universe in which your life is determined by an impersonal fate where everything is determined by gravitation, electromagnetism, the strong force and the weak force, the four forces of the physics world system. But in neither case is there any such thing as genuine responsibility of man; man is merely a victim of his environment. Now that's not the way the Bible thinks. The Bible thinks in terms of the Creator-creature distinction. And that means God is the Creator and He's not subject to the creation. You are subject to the creation and so in the biblical view we have two levels of being. Sovereignty is a Creator quality.

It doesn't exist in you, sovereignty isn't a creation, it's an eternal attribute of the infinite personal God. Responsible choice is what you have, responsibility is a creation. And therefore the two can never collide because they function from two totally different spheres. So don't get upset if someone says you Christians have a problem with a sovereign God and responsible man. You don't have a problem. They have a problem

Verse 11 puts the two together, Paul take courage. That's a command and since a command implies a choice to obey or disobey Paul can either do it or not. But the rest of the verse is a sovereign declaration of God's plan for Paul's life. You will go to Rome. Now we're going to see that when verse 11 was uttered, when the word of God comes into history Satan reacts. Anytime God reveals what He's going to do in history Satan says no you're not going to do it. So from this point forward we trace God's move, Satan's countermove and God's counter to the countermove. This is the conflict; and it's the conflict over who controls history. Paul happens to be plugged into that conflict through the Lord Jesus Christ in v 11 and so Paul is the center of the conflict on the road to Rome. His life gets scrutinized very closely in the conflict. And what we're learning is that if you are a believer you too are plugged into that conflict through the Lord Jesus Christ and what happens in your life is much larger than your life, it has cosmic implications. Somehow we are plugged into a war that is taking place in the heavenlies. And we don't have access to the play-by-play details but God, somehow through human beings saved in Christ, is winning a cosmic war. Who will win the war? Whose plans will come to pass? The answer to that question is reached by Acts 28. And so we're entering into the drama of how the word of God brooks no opposition. So from Acts 23:11-Acts 28:31 we go into a lot of detail but don't forget the real issue. Who controls history?

Now in Acts 23:12 Paul faces the first Satanic opposition to v 11 and Paul's going to come into a stressful situation There's an assassination plot formed with over 40 men involved in taking Paul out. Is Paul going to take courage trusting that the word of God can do what it says it can do; or is Paul going to go into chaos mode and have a conniption? Well, let's see how Paul handles himself starting verse 12, **When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul.** ¹³**There were more than forty who formed this plot.** Now that's a radical oath that

could only be made by an extreme fanatic. No food or drink until we kill Paul. We're not told who these **Jews** were, only that they were **Jews**. Some people think they were the Zealots, the *sicarii* or Assassins, who were a sect on the extreme political right wing, they were the Jewish nationalists of the day, they were the types that ended up about 15 years later up on Masada for three years while the Romans surrounded them down below under Flavius Silva's command. They hated the Romans. So there's no question the Zealots were radical and it's plausible they made this radical oath. Not only would it allow them an opportunity to kill Paul but it would also give them an opportunity to kill a few Romans as they fought their way to Paul.

So when it says they **bound themselves**, that word **bound** is the verb *anathematize*, from *anathema* which means "put us under a curse." It means they're saying may God kill us if we **eat or drink** until we kill Paul. It's a fanatical claim by what we would call a group of terrorists. In v 14 we read their plot. **They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul."** ¹⁵**"Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near *the place*."** Alright so it's an ambush, they're going to take Paul out of the Antonia Fortress down to wherever they're going to investigate and at the right time, at the right place they're going to attack and murder Paul. But notice who they're bringing into the plot in v 14: the **chief priests and elders**. The **chief priests and elders** are the national leadership. Shouldn't we be afraid of the national leadership? The national leadership makes judgments about the Law. But obviously if they're being brought into the plot we know the national leadership is corrupt. They were probably involved in all kinds of conspiracies and plots. Now think about what the national leadership are about to do. They're going to be accomplices in breaking Israel's Constitution. "Thou shalt not murder" is on page one of their Constitution. But they're not concerned about violating the Constitution. Just rip it to shreds. A common thing that happens in countries. And now we can see very clearly why Paul didn't want to stand in front of these men. These men were corrupt and what do you think going to happen if you have to stand before a corrupt court? You're going to get a corrupt judgment. So Paul wanted out of there.

Now while all this plotting and conspiring is going on we find in v 16 one of the most tantalizing incidents in all Acts. Paul had a nephew in Jerusalem at the time. **But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul.** We've seen the plot by Satan to destroy Paul so Paul can't reach Rome. Now we're seeing God's countermove, a nephew of Paul somehow got wind of the plot. We didn't even know Paul had a sister, so now we learn a) he's got a sister and b) she's got a son. We don't know if she's in Jerusalem but obviously her son is and he and Paul are on good terms. We don't know why this kid was in Jerusalem. He could have been like Paul when he was a young man who studied in Jerusalem. And if that's the case then he's probably a rabbinic student and that's how he may have caught wind of this through someone on the Sanhedrin who leaked it and he overheard. But if that's the case then why was he friendly to Paul? If he was studying Rabbinic Judaism he wasn't a believer and then why help out uncle Paul? We don't know except to say that he was and in any case Paul was on friendly terms with his sister and nephew. Paul didn't have a friendly relationship with his father. His father had disowned him we think but there were other family members that were sensitive to Paul. And so somehow this son gets wind of the plot and reaches Paul. Paul was in the Roman barracks so this kid must have had connections because no one just gets into Roman barracks. We think this guy had connections high up. And now we're seeing how God's sovereign hand works. Satan has made his clever move, God makes a better countermove. He always has another guy He can pull out of the woodwork and counter the plan of Satan. Always and everywhere just when it appears Satan has foiled God's plan, God foils Satan's plan.

Verse 17, **Paul called one of the centurions to him and said,** now here is a thing which to appreciate you have to understand Roman military rank. The Roman army had squads and squads were 6-10 men, and then you had ten squads put together into a Century and so a century had 60-100 men which is roughly equivalent to two Army platoons. A centurion was over these men and he would be the equivalent of a US Army Captain. Then they assembled them into Maniples of 100-200 men which is roughly equivalent to a Company, and then into a Cohort which was roughly 300-600 men, equivalent to a small Battalion. And we know one Cohort was on duty at the Antonia Fortress, that's about 600 men. The rank of the commander would be the equivalent today of a Lt Colonel or a full Colonel. So Claudius Lysias,

who's called the commander, is a Lt Colonel or Full Colonel and the centurions are captains. Now watch what Paul does; he knows the rank and he knows how to work with it. Verse 17, after the nephew reports in to Paul, Paul calls one of the captains. He doesn't go to the colonel; he doesn't have access to the colonel. So he calls in one of the captains and says **"Lead this young man to the colonel, for he has something to report to him."** ¹⁸**So he took him and led him to the colonel...** the thing that's important about verse 17 is you must consciously set it in context of verse 11. In verse 11 Jesus Christ has given a sovereign declaration to Paul and that's the neat thing you want to watch here. Here is God's sovereignty and man's responsibility operating. God in His sovereignty says that you, Paul, will go to Rome. That's My sovereignty. But Paul does not sit back like some hyper-Calvinist fatalist and say well folks, no sweat, I'm going to Rome. He knows he's going to Rome because Christ has personally told him he's going to go to Rome, but does that stop Paul from seizing an opportunity to do something to secure his journey. Paul didn't have a problem with God's sovereignty and human responsibility. In Paul's mind when he gets the report in verse 17 he says, aha, God's going to get me to Rome, this young man is the means of carrying it out. Paul interpreted all his circumstances as governed by God. So verse 11 my destiny is settled, verse 17 the means is this young man. Paul did not say, well that's nice kid but you just get out of here kid, God's going to keep me safe. So obviously Paul's view was that God has certain means to getting us to the destiny. And God doesn't only provide the destiny He also provides the means and we're to recognize them and act on them. So the kid walks in, gives the report. Paul says this is God's counter to Satan's move and so now I've got to get the word up to the colonel and the best way to do it is to give it to the captain and he can take it up the chain of command.

Now verse 19 is a very interesting and sensitive scene. Hopefully you've noticed by now that Luke in the Book of Acts is very complimentary of the Roman Army. In fact, the whole NT from the Gospels into the Acts, the writers appreciate the fact that the Roman Army respected law and order. So watch, **the commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, began to inquire of him privately, "What is it that you have to report to me?"** Now that is a magnificent picture of a big Colonel reaching down to a little boy and saying, now son, come here, what is it you would like to talk to me about, tell me. There's no I don't have time for it kid, there's no brutality, there's no brushing him off, there's tenderness toward him. And so

he takes him into private and the boy tells him, verse 20, **“The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. ²¹“So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you.”** And that would make the Roman commander an accomplice to murder too. In the least he would not have protected a Roman citizen and that would be a serious blemish on his career. ²²**So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, “Tell no one that you have notified me of these things.”**

Now, verse 23 is an excellent example of the proper operation of divine institution number four; human government. The commander doesn't take any chances. He's seen the Jews angry outburst on three occasions against Paul so under cover of night the commander takes precautions to protect a Roman citizen. **And he called to him two of the centurions and said, “Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night, that's 9pm, so a cover of dark, to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen.”** How many soldiers in all? **Two hundred infantry**, these are heavily armed men, so they have packs weighing 80-100 pounds, they are heavily armed, **seventy horsemen** and that's the equivalent of the cavalry so they can travel quickly and finally **two hundred spearmen** which is poorly translated, we'd say they have something in their arm, they're light infantry so they have some kind of a lance in their hand and they can respond quickly to an attack until the cavalry and heavily armed soldiers arrive to reinforce. Now if you compute that's a total of 470 men to protect one citizen. In other words, the commander is going to protect this citizen. Why is that? Because quite frankly if Paul gets killed he doesn't want the pile of paperwork that comes with it. So there's no way a Roman citizen is going to get killed under his protection. And therefore he takes 470 men out of the Antonia Fortress. How many were there to begin with? Somewhere between 600-1000. So he empties half of his men for this mission. Now that's a smart officer. But it's something more than that. When God does something in history He always does it first class. What did the Lord Jesus tell Paul to do? **Take courage**, I'm going to get you to Rome. This time it's going to be easy. God takes half the Antonia Fortress and empties it on behalf of Paul, two hundred of them are armed to the teeth, seventy of them are

lightning quick on horseback and another two hundred are lightly armed and can respond quickly. And to put on the finishing touches, Paul gets a horse too, so Paul gets to ride 65 miles to Caesarea. Now are you impressed with God's promise in 23:11?

So they're going to take him to **Caesarea**. There are two Caesarea's in the land; this one is Caesarea Maritima or Caesarea by the Sea. And with a name like Caesarea you can tell it was named after Caesar. And therefore it was a Roman city with all the accoutrements of Roman life. This is where the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate ruled from, and the guy here is in his line. Caesarea has access to land, it has access to sea and so it's perfectly situated as a Roman administrative base and a military base. The guy that was serving as procurator, or we'd say governor, was a man by the name of Antonius Felix. And Felix was a loser. He had been a slave but he was set free by Emperor Claudius' mother, Antonia, hence his first name Antonius. And he started rising through the political ranks because of the way he could play the women. He was married three times, once to the daughter of Herod Agrippa I to find favor with the Jews. Something happened to her and she died and then he married even higher up, the daughter of the Emperor and so through these women he got this position which he came to in AD52/53. The historian Tacitus sums Felix up nicely, Felix "reveled in cruelty and lust, and wielded the power of a king with the mind of a slave."¹ Which is a nice way of saying he was an idiot.

And so, when the commander sent him over he was probably wondering what Felix would do with this one. This will be interesting, but in any case I'm not going to have Paul assassinated on my watch so he sends almost 500 soldiers to protect him on the journey. And in verse 25 we have the letter he sent to Felix, ²⁵**And he wrote a letter having this form:** ²⁶**"Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. ²⁷"When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman.** Now is that true? Lysias didn't know Paul was a Roman citizen when he sent his soldiers down to tear him away from the mob. He was just trying to quell a riot. In fact he later had Paul strung up for scourging and it wasn't until Paul said, hey guys, is it really lawful to scourge a Roman citizen. So that part of the story isn't accurate but I can't blame the guy since the mistake he made there was one that could have ended his military career. But we continue v 28, **"And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; ²⁹and I**

found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. So right there he admits as far as he can tell he's innocent. ³⁰**“When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you.”**

And if you will correlate that with other notices in the book of Acts this is one of four times that Paul, the voice of Christianity, is brought before Roman counsels and declared innocent. The first one was Gallio, Acts 18 in Corinth, he said look, I see Paul here, I've examined him, we've got the standards of the Roman law and by Roman law these people are innocent. We have the colonel and he does the same thing, he clears Paul and says they're innocent. Later on Felix will do the same thing. He doesn't do many things but he does do one thing right. And then Festus, so four times Luke recorded... what do you think Luke is getting at here? He's getting at the fact that Christianity is not an insurgent movement; it is not something anti-Rome, it is something very much pro-law and order; it is something that is, in fact, protected by Rome and any fair person in the law will see that.

³¹**So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris.** Antipatris is located about halfway between Jerusalem and Caesarea, just up the coast from Lydda, so they take Paul there during the night. Verse 32, **But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks.** The soldiers go back, the cavalry deliver Paul. But think about that. Jerusalem to Antipatris is a 35 mile march in one night which shows you the tremendous fitness of the Roman Army. They marched from 9pm the night before and arrived probably around 5am and then after a couple of hours of rest they march all the way back. 70 miles in a day! By comparison the average person could walk 15-20 miles a day. So 70 miles is one heck of a march which shows you the Roman Army didn't mess around. These men were well-trained and regularly practiced drills to stay in shape. So the soldiers go back, the cavalry press on, in verse 33, up the coast to Caesarea. **When these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him.** ³⁴**When he had read it, he asked from what province he was, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, and Cilicia was a very well respected province which explains why he responds so positively,** ³⁵**he said, “I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also,” giving orders for him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.** And that's another little note thrown in there on purpose by Luke. Does Herod's Praetorium ring a bell? There is a conscious attempt by Luke to show

a link between Jesus and Paul. Jesus was first persecuted by the Jews and then turned over to the Roman authorities for trial, and now we have Paul first persecuted by the Jews and then turned over to the Roman authorities for trial. What is that to illustrate? Who is Acts written for? Us. What were Christ's closing words? "As the world treated Me it will treat you." And so the leader of Christianity in the west must be treated the way Christ is treated; he must be persecuted, he must be arrested, he must be put on trial. In fact, Herod had several praetorium's throughout the land. He had one in Jerusalem where Jesus was tried, he had one in Caesarea and lo and behold who is tried there? Paul. Both tried in Herods' Praetorium's.

To conclude what can we say? We can say that Jesus Christ said Paul I will get you to Rome and Satan said no you will not. And to stop Him he orchestrated 40 Jewish guys to try and assassinate Paul. But in a brilliant countermove, Jesus Christ says Satan, I can bring Paul's nephew into the loop because I control all the people in history, I control all the conversations in history and I'm going to make sure that while your 40 fanatical Jews are in their huddle making the plan that one Jew is going to be there on the inside getting the data. So I do it right under your nose Satan because I control, not you. So the report gets to Paul who sends it up the chain of command to the colonel who then sends not 40 guys but 500 guys to protect Paul. So when your in a jam and you're having a hard time believing the word of God is sufficient and you get the idea that Satan is strong, Satan is really hurting me right now, maybe Satan has access to all things and maybe the word of God isn't strong enough, maybe Satan can topple it, just remember this story with Paul and ask yourself, who's word comes to pass? Whose word dictates history? And then you can relax you can take courage; you can walk by faith and enjoy a relaxed mental attitude.

ⁱ (Tacitus, *History* 5.9) Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.;* *The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006; 2006).

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