

THE PROMISED PRESENCE FOR CHRIST'S WITNESS  
ACTS 22:30-23:35

I.

Sometimes it seems like Christian leaders have more than their fair share of difficulties. Those of you who have been around the church for a while know about my family's health history. Those of you who are newer may not. My wife struggled with fibromyalgia for most of her adult life. She developed diabetes, had a couple of ministrokes, and then had heart issues. Both of my boys had significant allergies early in life. Bart still has health problems. Scott was largely bedridden with Lyme Disease for seventeen years of his life. It was a delight to participate in the baby shower for his first child last Sunday. The other staff people here have also had some health challenges.

Robertson McQuilkin was president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary in South Carolina for many years. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROBERTSON MCQUILKIN) He and his wife celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary one year early because wife Muriel had Alzheimer's, and the rest of the family was concerned that the next year she would not have the mental ability to appreciate the celebration.

The school that Robertson McQuilkin led seemed to be thriving, and he was much loved by students and faculty. As his wife's condition worsened, a companion was hired to stay with Muriel during the day. Still she would sneak away frequently and end up in the school at his office. She grew increasingly distressed when her husband was not around. He finally decided to resign from his office and devote his full attention to care of his wife. What was the divine purpose in that? (PROJECTOR OFF)

Such trials, of course, are not limited to vocational Christian leaders. Many of you are currently, or have in the past, faced significant trials. The greatest challenge to our faith often comes when the trials arrive in the midst of our genuine efforts to serve and obey God.

The Apostle Paul was whole-hearted in his commitment to Christ. He told the Philippian Christians in his New Testament letter that he had given up everything for the sake of serving Jesus. Yet from our study of Acts we have seen that this servant of God seemed to face trials everywhere he turned. He was jailed, beaten, stoned, threatened, criticized, and rejected by people he was seeking to reach. Nevertheless he wouldn't quit. He seemed unstoppable. How did he do it? What kept him going? More importantly, how can we keep going when we face suffering in the midst of our humble efforts to serve God? The passage before us this morning may tell us how.

I.

From the last verse of Acts #22 to v. 10 of #23 we are going to consider THE PROBLEMS FOR CHRIST'S WITNESSES. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE PROBLEMS

FOR CHRIST'S WITNESSES) Back in #1 we saw that a central theme of this book, written by Luke, was the statement of Christ that His followers were to serve as witnesses for Him when they received the power of the Holy Spirit. Acts has focused on that witness that went forth from Peter and John, the other twelve apostles, Philip the evangelist, Stephen, Barnabas, and the Apostle Paul. All of these men were faithful to proclaim what they knew about Jesus. But they all encountered significant problems.

In recent weeks we have seen that Paul was seeking to be a witness by bringing a gift of money from the mostly Gentile churches in the west to the famine plagued Jewish Christians of the east. Paul was seeking to promote the unity of the body of Christ, and he was looking for opportunities to witness to his unconverted Jewish brethren. (FORTRESS ANTONIA AND TEMPLE) As he was participating in a Jewish ritual in the temple, Jews from the region of Ephesus stirred up a riotous crowd that was about to do in this rabbi who had devoted his life to telling Gentiles about Jesus.

Paul would have been killed by his angry countrymen, except that Roman soldiers stationed in the Fortress Antonia on the northwest side of the temple compound, intervened in the riot and rescued Paul. (FORTRESS ANTONIA) As he was being hauled up the steps, Paul had a brief conversation with the Roman commander, who allowed Paul to address the crowd. His powerful testimony didn't go over well with most of the people. The commander didn't understand the language in which Paul and the Jews were speaking. So he brought him into the barracks and was about to use typical methods of torture to get this troublemaker to explain why the crowd was so upset. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The soldiers discovered that he was a Roman citizen, which meant that the commander had to be much more careful in how Paul was treated. Because of his citizenship Paul was protected from any kind of physical harm until proper legal procedures were followed. Formal charges had to be lodged against him, and so far the commander couldn't even figure out why everybody was so angry at Paul.

Thus in v. 30 we read, **“But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.”** The Sanhedrin was the governing council that was composed of 71 priests, rabbis, and leading laymen. This council was the top governing body for religious matters involving Jews all over the world. It was also allowed by the Romans to exercise civil authority over most criminal and civil matters in Judea, and especially in Jerusalem. Since Paul was a Roman citizen, the Roman criminal procedures would take precedence over the Jewish legal system. So the Jews could bring charges before the Roman authorities, but first the commander had to figure out what the complaint was.

The Jewish Talmud says that forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem, which happened in 70 AD, the meeting place of the Sanhedrin was moved to the “stores.” (PROJECTOR ON--- SANHEDRIN TEMPLE) Many scholars think that this term refers to the south wall of the temple compound. The hall was known as the Royal Stoa.

The Sanhedrin met in the eastern end of the hall. (TEMPLE 006) We know from Jewish writings that the members of the Sanhedrin sat in two semicircles. At least 23 members had to be present to conduct business. The high priest led the meetings.

Probably it was here where the meeting described in v. 30 took place. It was not a formal meeting of the Sanhedrin, however. It was simply a gathering of the Sanhedrin members called at the request of the Roman authority to have some explanation about what complaint was being made against Paul.

According to v. 1 of the next chapter Paul was given a chance to speak first. He began by claiming that he had lived his life to this point with a clean conscience before God. Paul had been involved in killing Christians. But at that time he had been convinced that he was serving God. So his point seems to be that he had been living according to the spiritual light that he had. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This one statement, however, provoked the high priest Ananias to order Paul to be struck on the mouth. Jewish law said that no Jew was ever to be struck in the face, especially before he was found guilty. In Jewish law the accused were presumed to be innocent until proven guilty. So the high priest was clearly violating his own law code.

But Ananias was not the kind of person who cared very much about that. During the course of his tenure between 47 and 59 AD his concern was about maintaining power and fattening his pocketbook. So he cozied up to the Roman rulers, and he bought people off, and he had a few people knocked off, and he confiscated money that should have gone to the common priests.

Paul may not have known that background. But he knew Jewish law thoroughly, and he knew how wrong it was to be treated as he was treated. Thus in v. 3 he says, **“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?”** Do you think that perhaps Paul was a little upset?

White-washing a wall was a cheap way of making a wall look good when it was really in need of major repairs. Paul was saying that Ananias maybe looked nice and religious, but he was in reality a hypocrite. Did Paul lose his temper here? He certainly didn't seem to offer Ananias his other cheek. Paul was not sinless, and perhaps he reacted too strongly. But then the Old Testament prophets often spoke out strongly against evil leaders of their people. What he said was true. Ananias was a hypocrite. He was violating the law. The high priest was supposed to be God's representative to mankind, but he was working for Satan.

Paul's words were also prophetic. God was going to strike down Ananias. About eight years later Jewish nationalists would lead a revolt against Rome. One of the first people whom they would go after was Ananias, who was well known for his Roman

sympathies. Ananias managed to escape when his house was burned down. But shortly afterward he was found and quickly executed by his own countrymen.

According to v. 4 other Jews promptly criticized Paul for his verbal assault on the high priest. In v. 5 Paul responds, **“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.’”** Commentators are divided about how to interpret this. Some suggest that Paul was being sarcastic toward Ananias: “This guy is not the legitimate high priest. If he was a legitimate representative of God, I wouldn’t say what I did to him.”

The other possibility is that Paul did not realize that Ananias was the high priest. He had been away from Jerusalem for many years. This was an informal hearing, and it was not obvious who was the high priest. Confronted with this reality, he acknowledged wrongdoing and quoted from the Book of Deuteronomy which warned against speaking against a ruler of the people, even though Ananias was a bad guy.

In either case Paul realized that he could not expect to receive just treatment from this Jewish tribunal that was run by a man who had little regard for Jewish law. So he tried a new tactic. According to v. 6 Paul announced, **“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!”** Luke explains in the following verses, **“And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.”**

The Sanhedrin was composed of three groups: priests, rabbis, and leading laymen. Most of the priests were Sadducees. The rabbis were mostly Pharisees. The majority of the laymen, who are typically called elders, were Sadducees. The rabbis, the teachers, generally had more influence among the people. Paul, with his background as a Pharisee, saw an opportunity for support from these leading rabbis. He may have also entertained hope that some of them would be drawn to Jesus. Since the Pharisees believed in angels and spirits and in the resurrection from the dead, there was a greater possibility that they could accept the notion that Jesus had risen from the dead. There was less hope for the Sadducees, since their theology was further away from that of the Christians.

Verse 9 adds, **“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?’”** Some of these rabbis probably began to suspect that they were the victims of a setup job. This Paul was being vilified by the Sadducees for the real purpose of undermining the position of the Pharisees. So the Pharisees became more heated in their defense of Paul.

The situation among these holy, peace-loving, religious leaders got so heated that the Roman commander began to fear that Paul was going to be torn to pieces. It is unclear if they were speaking in a language he could understand, or if he had a translator

present. Again he rescued Paul from the mob and brought him back to the Roman fort. Still he has not figured out what the charges are against Paul.

The Sanhedrin, for its part, has had another exposure to the gospel of Christ. Some 25 years earlier they had interviewed Jesus Himself. Later they heard the Christian message from Peter and John. After that they heard from the other disciples. Then they had Stephen in for a grilling before they had him executed. Now they have heard from the witness for Christ, Paul. Again they refuse to accept the gospel. Judgment from God will come upon them in about ten years. When the Romans come, their preferred method of execution will be crucifixion. Ironically many members of the Sanhedrin will be crucified. It is divine justice for their condemnation of Jesus and mistreatment of Paul.

Luke records at the beginning of the book the command from Jesus that His disciples are to be witnesses for Him. Luke's account records the faithful witness of those early disciples. It also records the serious trials that they faced in doing that. The twelve apostles were all jailed at one time or another. Stephen was stoned to death. James was put to death. Paul faced all kinds of problems and challenges.

Still today human rights experts acknowledge that Christianity is the most persecuted religious group in the world. Nigeria has been getting a bit more attention in recent days for the persecution of Christians which is happening there. Just last Sunday 150 Christians in three separate churches in northwest Nigeria were kidnapped. The perpetrators of these attacks are Islamic radicals and a group of Islamic herdsmen called Fulanis. According to one church leader, **"We have a Muslim president, a Muslim vice president, the chief of justice is a Muslim, and everything is just skewed in favor of the Muslim. The national security adviser to Nigeria's president is a Fulani. The minister for defense is a Fulani, and his assistant is a Fulani."** (*World*, Dec. 2025, p. 98)

Fortunately we enjoy more governmental protection in the US. But still the Biblical, evangelical brand of Christianity is frequently ridiculed and opposed. As you know, a Baptist church in St. Paul was invaded last Sunday by protesters, and local officials did little about it. Jesus warned those who would follow Him that there would be a cost involved in being His disciples. He encouraged people to count that cost before deciding to follow Him.

II.

There are also benefits that come from being a follower of Jesus. Verse 11 makes reference to one of those benefits. It deals with THE PROMISE FOR CHRIST'S WITNESSES. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE PROMISE FOR CHRIST'S WITNESSES) The historian Luke writes, **"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.'"**

After this incident with the Sanhedrin I suspect that Paul was disappointed, maybe even a bit depressed. His witness to the large crowd of religious pilgrims in the temple had not been accepted. The Sanhedrin did not buy his message. The Pharisees were somewhat supportive of his theology, but they weren't willing to accept this rising of Jesus from the dead story. Paul had gone to the temple in the first place in hopes of getting the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem to recognize that he was still an upholder of their Jewish religious tradition. We don't know if they responded positively to him. There is no mention of any outward support for Paul from the Jerusalem church. Earlier we saw that Paul was hoping to go to Rome and Spain to preach the gospel. Now it was looking like he wasn't going to get out of custody anytime soon. There was even some danger of getting killed. So Paul may have experienced some discouragement.

We saw some weeks ago that when Paul was at Corinth in Greece, he was down emotionally. At that time he received a divine vision in which the Lord told him to hang in there and that great things were going to happen spiritually in Corinth. They did. Now in Jerusalem at a point of considerable discouragement the Lord appeared to him again. The first thing that He said to Paul was: "Take courage."

In the midst of difficult circumstances the challenge to the people of God is to believe that God is with them. After Abraham rescued his nephew Lot from a much larger military force, he began to worry about what these people were going to do to him the next spring when city-states went to war. (GENESIS 15:1) We read in Genesis 15 that God appeared to him and said, "**Fear not, Abram, I am your shield...**"

In Luke #17 Jesus describes the end times. At the beginning of #18 he tells the parable of the widow and the unjust judge. At the end of that story He challenges his listeners (LUKE 18:8), saying, "**Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?**" The question for the people of God in the midst of the most difficult circumstances of life is always: "Is God with us? Are we alone? Is my life really without purpose? Or are the sovereign God and the Lord Jesus Christ alive and active and looking out for us?"

Paul here received divine assurance that the Lord was indeed alive and active and looking out for His apostle. In addition He told Paul that he was going to make it to Rome and have the opportunity to witness for Him there. In saying that the Lord Jesus seemed to affirm Paul's witness in Jerusalem. He also gave him a specific promise that would sustain him during the next two years in which he would be imprisoned in Judea. Even though Paul would outwardly appear to be a prisoner and a victim of injustice, this promise would sustain him and enable him to behave as a master of events rather than as a victim. Paul would have the confidence that the God-man Jesus Christ was indeed with him.

(ACTS 1:8) In Acts 1 v. 8 Jesus told His followers, "**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**" At the very end of the Book of Matthew (MATTHEW 28:18-19) Jesus is recorded as saying, "**All authority in**

heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (MATTHEW 28:20) teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**” In the midst of difficult circumstances, in the midst of spiritual battles will we believe the promise that Christ is with us?

III.

After dealing with the problems for Christ’s witnesses and the promise for Christ’s witnesses our story goes on in vv. 12-35 to describe THE PROVISIONS FOR CHRIST’S WITNESSES. (III. THE PROVISIONS FOR CHRIST’S WITNESSES) As is often the case in the Christian life, after we learn about some promise from God or after we have some rich spiritual experience, we face testing. Immediately after Paul receives this promise from God that he will have the opportunity to preach in Rome, that promise is threatened.

Beginning in v. 12 we read, **“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. 13 There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. 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. 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.’”**

The normal formula for such a vow would go like this: **“So may God do to us and more also, if we eat or drink anything until we have killed Paul.”** This was a bold and dangerous plot. The Roman commander always had guards go with Paul. So there were likely to be casualties for any conspirators who sought to make such an attack. This shows the strength of the hatred these people had toward Paul.

We saw that it was Jews from the Roman province of Asia, whose capital was Ephesus, who had originally stirred up the mob in the temple against Paul. It may well have been these visitors from Asia who were in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost and who were behind this plot. Paul had spent two years in Ephesus recently, preaching the gospel and developing a large church in the area. The unbelieving Jews in Ephesus clearly resented this man whom they regarded as an apostate. Now they were going to do something about it. Would the promise of God be thwarted?

Notice also that these conspirators approached the chief priests and elders of the Sanhedrin, but apparently not the scribes or rabbis. Why? Because the chief priests and elders were Sadducees. The rabbis were mostly Pharisees. The Pharisees were more sympathetic toward Paul. They probably would have opposed and thwarted the plan.

In v. 16 we see the providence of God at work in providing for Christ’s witness. Luke says, **“Now the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered**

**the barracks and told Paul.**” We can only speculate about who this nephew was or about how he came to know of the plot against his uncle’s life. Some years earlier Paul had implied that his whole family had rejected him. Obviously at this point his nephew has some care or interest in Paul’s well being.

Beginning in v. 17 we learn about how this information was handled: **“Paul called one of the centurions and said, ‘Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him.’ 18 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.’ 19 The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, ‘What is it that you have to tell me?’ 20 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. 21 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.’ 22 So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, ‘Tell no one that you have informed me of these things.’”** The commander believes this young man’s report. He perhaps knew the high priest and his cronies well enough to believe that such a plot was well within the realm of possibility.

So the commander gets a lot of Roman troops together to get Paul out of the city. The objective is to move quickly and to provide sufficient protection for this Roman citizen. (JERUSALEM TO CAESAREA) The plan is to take Paul to Caesarea via Antipatris. Caesarea was the Roman capital of the province of Judea. It was the home of the Roman governor, who at this time was a man named Felix. It also had the largest Roman population in all of Judea and the most Roman soldiers. Paul would be safe there, and this commander would be able to get Paul out of his hair and have the governor take over responsibility for this politically volatile situation.

The commander also sent a letter along with this contingent. In it we learn that the commander’s name is Claudius Lysias. We saw last time that this fellow had bought the right to his Roman citizenship. The use of “Claudius” in his name suggests that the officer got his citizenship directly or indirectly from the Roman emperor Claudius, who had died just a couple of years earlier. The name “Lysias” is Greek, suggesting that the commander had his roots in Greece.

The letter, which Paul probably heard read by the Roman governor in Caesarea, is a straight forward account of what had happened in Jerusalem with one exception. Lysias tried to portray himself in the best light by indicating that he had rescued Paul because he learned that he was a Roman citizen. That was not really true. But that little observation in the letter adds credibility to the whole account. Also it is significant that in v. 29 the commander says that he discovered no accusation against Paul that was deserving of death or imprisonment. Luke originally wrote this historical record to a Roman official named Theophilus. Throughout his account he is careful to demonstrate that when Christians were brought before Roman officials, the Romans consistently

judged that the behavior and beliefs of the Christians were not in violation of Roman law.

Verse 31 then indicates that this Roman contingent brought Paul that same night as far as Antipatris, which was about 38 miles from Jerusalem. The next day they arrived in Caesarea. Governor Felix read the letter and asked about Paul's home province.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Some parts of the Roman Empire were ruled by vassal kings. If Paul came from one of these territories, it would have been diplomatic to consult that king about Paul's case. But Paul was from a region in Asia Minor that was a Roman province, governed by a man who was actually Felix's boss. So it would be up to Felix to handle the case. Before disposing of the case, Felix would have to find out what charges the Jews were going to make against him.

So did the forty Jews who vowed not to eat until Paul was killed starve to death? Not very likely. Jewish law at this time allowed vows to be broken in many situations. Since the chief priests were in on the plot anyway, they no doubt pronounced that God absolved them of responsibility for their vows. The view that God actually had of them was a different matter.

Paul's trials would not end here. He would spend two years in jail in Caesarea. Then he would be sent to Rome as a prisoner. En route there he would suffer shipwreck. In Rome he would spend three more years as a prisoner. Yet we will see that during this time Paul maintained a positive and confident attitude. He would continue to witness to Romans and Gentiles who dealt with him. He would write several letters that would one day be included in the New Testament.

What was the secret to his ability to persevere in the midst of difficult circumstances? It was his conviction that Christ was with him. That promise was proved out time and again in his experience. He saw the Lord protect him through the revelation of the plot against his life. He saw the legal system of the Romans protect him from harm at the hands of the Jews. He saw His protection in the rescue from shipwreck in the Mediterranean.

The promise of the verses known as the Great Commission is that Jesus will be with us--- assuming that we are about our Heavenly Father's business. For Robertson McQuilkin (PROJECTOR ON--- ROBERTSON MCQUILKIN) that business was caring for his wife. In 1990 he resigned from a seemingly productive job as president of Columbia Bible College to care for his wife. There was no quick healing. There was no speedy passage to heaven. His wife died in 2003.

Robertson McQuilkin later said in an interview, **“Our life is not the way we plot it or plan it. And so I guess all along I've just accepted whatever assignment the Lord gave me. This was his assignment....**

**“I often tell the story of how early on, about two years after I resigned, a young couple came out [to visit], and the man said, ‘Do you miss being president?’ And I**

said, 'You know, I never thought about it. But now that you asked, no, I don't. I enjoy my assignment. I like learning how to cook and garden and keep house, and taking care of my beloved.' ...

"But that night, after I went to bed, I thought, 'Lord, I never asked you why. I'm apt to ask you, 'Why not me?' Everybody is suffering; everybody has loss and heartache. It's part of our human, fallen condition. So you know I don't ask why. It's your business; you're the one in charge. But, if a coach puts his player on the bench, he must not need him in the game. And you don't have to tell me why you don't need me in the game. But sometime, if you'd like to, I'd much appreciate it.'

"So I went on to sleep. The next day, [Muriel] was still walking sort of wobbly, and we went out for our walk around the block. I'd have to hold her hand to balance her. I heard this shuffling behind me. I looked back and here's a local derelict. He looked us up and down. And then he said, 'Tha's good--- tha's real good. I like that.' And then he wandered off, mumbling, 'Tha's so good.' And I chuckled.

"When we got back to the garden and sat down, all of a sudden, it hit me. I said, 'Lord could you speak to me through a half-inebriated voice of an old derelict? You did, and if you say it's good, that's all I needed to hear.' So I had that assurance all along, that this was my assignment and was pleasing to him."

If we are about our Father's business and not just our own personal business, is the assurance that Christ is with us sufficient? If we are following His priorities, the promise of Jesus applies, **"Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."**