

**Text: Acts 23.12-23**

My dad had a little saying that went like this:

“Cheer up! It could be worse. So, I cheered up, and sure enough, things got worse!”

Last week our message closed with Paul’s vision from the Lord, assuring him that he would bear solemn testimony for the Lord in Rome also.

No doubt this raised Paul’s spirits and brought encouragement when he needed it most.

The next thing that happens is more trouble — life-threatening trouble.

What to make of the Lord’s assurances now?

I don’t mean to suggest at all that Paul ever doubted the Lord’s assurances. But it is interesting to watch what happens next with the Lord’s assurances in mind, and to see how Paul acts in response to the ongoing threats.

We must also note this:

What the Lord didn’t say was *how* Paul would get to Rome.

He remained in Roman custody. He had antagonistic Jews surrounding him. The way to Rome was very uncertain. How would it happen? How would the Lord get him out of custody in Jerusalem and to the halls of power in Rome itself?

What happens next begins to answer these questions.

One last thing before we read our text — our passage is full of drama. One can almost read it as the plot for some kind of action movie. That gives us heightened interest as we read:

Acts 23.12-23

Our title is: *Using Providential Means*.

Another way to say that would be “using ordinary means.” Which brings us to our proposition:

**Proposition:** The way we serve the Lord is by using those means he puts in our hands.

## I. Rising tension: the plot against Paul (12-15)

### A. The intricate elements of the plot

#### 1. Conspirators (see word “conspiracy”) (12)

**conspiracy:** “a twisting up together, a binding together. b. a secret combination, a coalition, conspiracy”<sup>1</sup>

“a plan devised by a number of persons who agree to act against someone or some institution”<sup>2</sup>

“**Banded together** (ποιησαντες συστροφην [poiēsantes sustrophēn]). ... here conspiracy, secret combination, binding together like twisted cords.”<sup>3</sup>

#### 2. A mutual agreement (“plot”) (13)

“a swearing together; a conspiracy”<sup>4</sup>

**plot:** “a plan for taking secret action against someone or some institution, with the implication of an oath binding the conspirators”<sup>5</sup>

#### 3. The conspirators — more than forty (13)

a. These men are of the “Jews” (12)

b. Not of the Sanhedrin

c. Nor representative of whole nation

d. Some suggest they may be Zealots (fierce and violent anti-Romans)

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (International Bible Translators (IBT), Inc., 1889), BibleWorks, v.8.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes E. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 358.

<sup>3</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ac 23.12.

<sup>4</sup> Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

<sup>5</sup> Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 358.

4. The binding oath (anathematize themselves) (12)
  - a. They swear to go without food or drink until they kill Paul
  - b. When they describe it to the chief priests, they say, “with an anathema we anathematized ourselves” (14)

“They placed themselves under an anathema, a curse, probably in some such form as ‘May I be cursed/eternally damned if ...’”<sup>6</sup>

Note: the Jews had a provision for releasing themselves from oaths that they couldn’t fulfill.

Irony: They swear an oath to God to break one of the 10 commandments, “Thou shalt not kill.” (the subject of the article in our bulletin today)

- B. The implicit cooperation of the council
  1. The plotters bring their plan to the council
  2. The text doesn’t say the council agreed, but implies it
  3. They repeat the “anathema,” emphasizing their commitment and the serious nature of the threat

## II. Providential provision: a well-placed nephew (16-21)

- A. We know nothing of Paul’s family except that
  1. His father was a Pharisee and a Roman citizen
  2. He had a sister who had a son (only mentioned here)
  3. This nephew sides with Paul (despite tradition that says his family disowned him)
- B. The nephew reports the plot to Paul in custody
  1. His visit is unsurprising
    - a. Paul was under guard, a prisoner
    - b. But as a citizen, he was held in relative comfort

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<sup>6</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 472.

- c. He would be allowed visitors
2. Paul's privileges include ready acquiescence of the soldiers
  - a. He calls the centurion to him
  - b. The centurion complies immediately with the request
  - c. The commander readily hears the young man's story

Note: "young man" could be any age from late teens to his twenties

3. The young man repeats the plot in detail (20-21)

"Verses 20–21 repeat the content of vv. 12–15. From the perspective of information, they contribute nothing new. The repetition, however, increases the dramatic effect considerably. With each new reference to the plot, the threat to Paul's life becomes more ominous."<sup>7</sup>

### III. First steps towards Rome: under escort (22-23)

- A. The commander takes the report seriously: "tell no one" (22)
  1. The commander plans to forestall the plotters by removing Paul immediately (doesn't wait for a request from the Council)
  2. The commander orders troops (23)
    - a. Two centuries in charge
    - b. Their two centuries (approx. 200 soldiers)
    - c. Seventy horsemen
    - d. An additional 200 spearmen
    - e. Total: about 470 soldiers

"The entire Roman force in Jerusalem consisted of a single cohort of up to 1,000 soldiers. The importance that Lysias attached to his prisoner is evidenced by his sending approximately half the force to protect him."<sup>8</sup>

3. The commander will also order mounts for Paul (24)

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<sup>7</sup> Polhill, 473.

<sup>8</sup> *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2135–36.

4. They are to set out by “the third hour of the night” *i.e.* 9 PM

All of this to forestall the plotting Jews, and for speed.  
(Approx. 60 miles to Caesarea)

## B. Consider God’s providence

“In sum, this passage is rooted in God’s providence, which moves to protect God’s children, although the means are not always known as they are here.”<sup>9</sup>

1. Providential placement of the nephew
2. Providential judgement/decisions of the commander
3. Providential provision of an armed escort

“The means are not always known...” God still works to protect his children, one way or another. God protected Stephen by taking him to heaven. In this case God protected Paul (and would protect him) because he promised to take him to Rome (v. 11).

When God doesn’t make his providence known, what are we to do? J. Vernon McGee has a (somewhat acid) comment:

“I find today that there is a group of super-pious folk, very sincere and very well-meaning, which tells me I should not go to a doctor concerning my cancer or other illnesses but that I should trust the Lord to heal me. Well, I certainly do trust the Lord; I have turned my case over to the Great Physician, and I believe He provides doctors. It would have been a simple thing for Paul to have told his nephew, ‘Thanks for telling me the news, but I’m trusting the Lord—so you can go back home.’ But we find here that Paul used the privileges of his Roman citizenship which were available to him. Obviously the Lord provides these means and He expects us to use them. This in no way means that we are not trusting Him. Rather, we are trusting God to use the methods and the means to accomplish His purpose.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Darrell L. Bock, “A Review of The Gospel According to Jesus,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146, no. 581 (1989): 678.

<sup>10</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary, V. 4*, electronic ed., vol. 4 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 616.

**Conclusion:**

**Proposition:** The way we serve the Lord is by using those means he puts in our hands.

What is available to you today? You have training, skills, opportunities. What are you doing with them?