



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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## THE BOOK OF ACTS

### Sermon Notes

#### Paul in Route to Rome, Part 6

#### *The Jewish Plot Against Paul is Foiled*

Acts 23:12-35

May 25, 2008

- I. **The Jews Form a Plot Against Paul**
- II. **The Plot Against Paul is Discovered**
- III. **The Plot Against Paul is Foiled**

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- ❑ This year, from August 8-24, the world will watch as amateur athletes from around the globe gather in Beijing, China for the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympiad.
- ❑ One of the most famous, and historic, events in the Olympic Games is the Marathon. The origins of this race can be traced all the way back to the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, B.C. following the Battle of Marathon.
- ❑ This battle, and the subsequent Athenian victory, stands as one of the greatest military victories in this history of warfare.
- ❑ In this battle, the combined Athenian army was outnumbered nearly 3 to 1 by the 25,000 Persians. Yet, the Athenians overcame these incredible odds and emerged victorious.

#### **The Battle of Marathon**

The battle of Marathon is one of history's most famous military engagements. It is also one of the earliest recorded battles. [The Athenian] victory over the Persian invaders gave the fledgling Greek city states confidence in their ability to defend themselves and belief in their continued existence. The battle is therefore considered a defining moment in the development of European culture.

On September 12, 490 BC, King Darius' Persian armada of 600 ships disgorged an invasion force of approximately 25,000 infantry and cavalry on Greek soil just north of Athens. Their mission was to crush the Greek states in retaliation for their support of their Ionian cousins who had revolted against Persian rule.

Undaunted by the numerical superiority of the invaders, Athens mobilized 9,000 warriors to defend their territory. The Athenians were also joined by 1,000 Plataeans in order to fight their common Persian enemy. The two forces [the Persians and the Athenians] met on the Plain of Marathon twenty-six miles north of Athens. The flat battlefield surrounded by hills and sea was ideal for the Persian cavalry. Surveying the advantage that the terrain and size of their force gave to the Persians, the Greek generals hesitated.

One of the Greek generals - Miltiades - made a passionate plea for boldness and convinced his fellow generals to attack the Persians. Miltiades ordered the Greek hoplites to form a line equal in length to that of the Persians. Then - in an act that his enemy believed to be complete madness - he ordered his Greek warriors to attack the Persian line at a dead run. In the ensuing melee, the middle of the Greek line weakened and gave way, but the flanks were able to engulf and slaughter the trapped Persians. An estimated 6,400 Persians were slaughtered while only 192 Greeks were killed.

The remaining Persians escaped on their ships and made an attempt to attack what they thought was an undefended Athens. However, the Greek warriors made a forced march back to Athens and arrived in time to thwart the Persians.

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According to legend, a messenger (Pheidippides) ran about 26 miles, from Marathon to Athens, to announce the great victory. However, upon reaching Athens, Pheidippides joyously told of the victory and then collapsed and died of exhaustion.

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- ❑ Throughout the Scriptures, God demonstrates His providential care of His people often times through victories in the face of overwhelming odds.
- ❑ Scenes such as David versus Goliath and Gideon’s 300 men reveal the truth that God, regardless of the number of His enemies, is ALWAYS in the majority.
- ❑ As the Apostle Paul asks, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

<b>I. The Jews Form a Plot Against Paul</b>
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- ❑ This section begins, in **Verses 12-13**, with Luke describing a secret plot by forty Jews who were seeking to kill Paul.
- ❑ Luke writes that these conspirators “bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul.”
  - This was clearly a **secret** conspiracy, a secret oath.

- This sort of “behind-the-scenes” secret conspiring stands in direct contrast to the manner in which God always works.
  - In fact, all of Christ’s acts during His earthly ministry were **PUBLIC**. His birth, baptism, miracles, trials, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension were all public acts attested by multiple witnesses.
  - The reason for this was that **Christ is TRUTH and He has NOTHING to hide!**
  - Yet, these conspirators were attempting to perpetuate a lie and, therefore, they were plotting in secret, intending to deceive and hide their unlawful motives and actions.
- The “oath” under which the Jews bound themselves likely took the form of an Old Testament covenant: “So may God do to us, and more also, if we eat or drink anything until we have killed Paul.”
  - In fact, the Greek word used to describe their oath was particularly strong: *anathematize*. This is where we get the word “anathema,” meaning to “curse or damn.”
  - In other words, what the forty Jewish men are stating is, “May we be cursed or eternally damned by God if we do not fulfill our oath to him [to kill Paul].”
  - NOTE: Under certain circumstances, Jewish law did provide for ways to escape from such a vow [*m. Ned. 3.1.3*].
  - Luke’s inclusion of the number of conspirators against Paul [40] adds to the drama of the scene – It is now **forty versus one**. Certainly the reason for this is to demonstrate God’s providential oversight of his servant Paul.
  - Further, it shows that Christ’s words and promise to Paul, in Verse 11, are true – Paul will witness to the truth of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ **in Rome!**
  - In fact, it does not matter what the “odds” are against God and His people...God will overcome all His enemies.
  - This is why the prophet Isaiah states, “**“No weapon that is formed against you will prosper; / And every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. / This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, / And their vindication is from Me,”** declares the LORD.” Isaiah 54:17
- Then, Luke writes, in **Verses 14-15**, that these forty conspirators went to the chief priests and the elders [the Sanhedrin] and said, “We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. 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.”

- The most revealing aspect of the conspirators’ statement is when they state, “...notify the commander to bring him down to you, *as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation...*”
  - It would be at this point that the forty men would ambush Paul. Then, they would murder him.
- These Jewish individuals, then, approach the Sanhedrin in attempt to convince them to *give the appearance* of justice in the case of Paul, all the while intending to kill him apart from the commandments of Scripture.
- They are, indeed, taking matters into their own hands and elevating themselves to the level of God for the purpose of fulfilling their own personal, selfish desires.
- This plot is consistent with Paul’s insistence that the high priest Ananias was a “**whitewashed wall**.” That is, on the “outside” he appears pure and righteous; but on the inside, he is dead...hollow.
- Once again, the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem cared more about *appearing* to the people as righteous [while pushing their self-serving agendas] more than acting righteously, in accordance with the Law, before the face of God.
- As Darrell Bock writes, “...In seeking to take matters into their own hands, they also overstep the divine law they think they are defending, by agreeing to lie and murder. The irony is that they take an oath before God that actually violates God’s standards and [revealed] will.”
- It is also significant that the conspirators approach **chief priests** and **elders**. These would have likely been only wealthy, aristocratic Sadducees. The Pharisees, who embraced the doctrine of the resurrection, are not mentioned.

## II. The Plot Against Paul is Discovered

- Then, in **Verse 16**, Luke writes, “but the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul.”
  - Here, we find out that the Apostle Paul has at least one relative in Jerusalem – his nephew.
  - This is quite interesting, though. The reason is because in Philippians 3:8 Paul writes that he had “suffered the loss of all things.” Most scholars agree that this means that Paul’s family [in Tarsus] had likely disowned him because of his embracing of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. The “loss of all things” is the loss of

his inheritance. Paul's father was a citizen of Tarsus and a Roman citizen. Therefore, we know that he was a wealthy man.

- What is seems is that Paul's sister must have maintained a certain degree of affection for Paul, even though he "betrayed" the family by following Jesus as the Christ. Paul's sister, it appears, has passed on the love for Paul to her son, Paul's nephew.
- We do not know if this young man was a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ or not. Also, we do not know why he was in Jerusalem as opposed to his likely home of Tarsus. It is quite possible, though, that the young man was in Jerusalem studying to be a rabbi. Yet, we do not know for sure.
- What we do know, however, is that he got word of the plot against his uncle.
- We do not know, either, why the young nephew heard of the plot. It may be that he "hung out" in Zealot circles. Yet, again, Luke does not tell us.
- Upon hearing of the plot, the young man goes immediately to his uncle, who is in the barracks of the Antonia Fortress.
  - That the nephew was able to gain access to Paul should not surprise the modern reader.
  - Paul was a Roman citizen and had not been convicted of a crime. Therefore, he would have had visitation privileges not granted to convicted criminals.
- After nephew informs Paul of the plot against him, the Apostle summons a centurion, asking that he take the young man to the commander, Lysias.
- Then, taking the young man aside privately, Lysias asks, "What is it that you have to report to me?"
  - Paul's nephew then reveals the plot to Lysias the Roman commander.
  - After this, Lysias tells the young man, in **Verse 22**, "Tell no one that you have notified me of these things."

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- NOTE: The word used to describe the young boy could mean that he was either a teenager or in his twenties.
- Thus, yet again, the providential protection of Paul reflects a sort of divine irony. **The secret plotting of forty Jewish zealots, along with the most wealthy and powerful Jewish aristocrats in Jerusalem, is foiled by the efforts of one young teenager!**

- As a result, the Gospel will continue to spread!

### III. The Plot Against Paul is Foiled

- After hearing from Paul’s nephew concerning the plot to kill the Apostle, the Roman commander, Lysias, “called to him two of the centurions and said, ‘Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour [9:00 p.m.] of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen.’”
  - In order to ensure Paul’s safe transfer to Caesarea, Lysias order that 470 Roman soldiers escort him. That was nearly half of the 1,000 soldiers stationed in Jerusalem!
  - The purpose of the large number of soldiers may have been simply to demonstrate and remind the Jews of the power and presence of Rome in their country.
  - Caesarea Martima was located about 65 miles north of Jerusalem. It was the Roman governor’s seat in Judea. Because of the nature of the accusations – a capital crime warranting the death penalty – only the Roman procurator had the authority and jurisdiction to hear the case.
  - The Roman Procurator / Governor at this time was Claudius Felix. Felix ruled as procurator of Judea from A.D. 52-59. He was a former slave who became a freedman of the imperial family in Rome. In fact, Felix owed his position as Judean Governor to his brother Pallas, also a freedman, who exercised a great deal of influence in the royal court Emperor Claudius. For a former slave to attain such privileged status in a royal administration was essentially unheard of.
  - Felix’s rule in Judea was marked with unprecedented brutality and ruthlessness. He often used cruel tactics intended to suppress and intimidate the Jews as well as prevent any possibility of an uprising. Roman historian Tacitus referred to Felix as one who “occupied the office of a king while having the mind of a slave, saturated with cruelty and lust” (*History* 5.9).

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- This is the last time that Paul will be in Jerusalem in the Book of Acts.
- Notice, here, that God, in His providence, uses pagan Roman soldiers as the means to carry Paul away from Jerusalem and back into the Gentile world. Like the occurrence at Pentecost, as Paul leaves Jerusalem, he carries the Gospel message with him, spreading it like seed everywhere he goes. Consequently, *it is precisely because of the efforts* of the forty conspirators that the Gospel message leaves Jerusalem and spreads “to the uttermost parts of the earth.”

- Another way of looking at this scene is this: The means God uses to fulfill the words of Jesus in Acts 23:11 [that Paul would bear witness in Rome] is the secret plot of the forty Jewish conspirators.

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- Along with the 470 member entourage, Lysias sends a letter to governor Felix.
- The letter reads as follows:

Claudius Lysias, to the Most Excellent Governor Felix:

Greetings. 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. And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. 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.

- The letter contains five parts:
  - First an Introduction (Verse 26)
  - Secondly, Paul’s Arrest (Verse 27)
  - Thirdly, the Investigation of the charges (Verse 28)
  - Fourthly, the Conclusion (Verse 29);
  - And Finally, the reason why Paul is in Caesarea (Verse 30).
- The letter opens by Lysias referring to Felix as “most excellent...”
  - This was a proper address for the “equestrian order of Roman society.” This was the equivalent to the order of “knights.” However, Felix was not technically a part of this order. Yet, the title was assumed by governors of provinces such as Judea, as most of them came from the equestrian order.
  - What is clear; however, is that Lysias is trying to ingratiate himself to the governor, trying to flatter him.
- As one who has an understanding of the events surrounding Paul’s arrest in the temple area, the letter to Felix clearly is an attempt to “stretch the truth” in order to make Lysias [the author of the letter] look good.
  - Lysias states that he “rescued” Paul in the temple area; and then he immediately goes into the scene before the Sanhedrin [the Council].
  - In other words, Lysias “conveniently” leaves out the part where he put Paul in two chains (21:33) and nearly tortured and flogged him.

- Yet, the most significant aspect of the letter is when Lysias states, "...I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment."
    - In other words, Lysias is declaring Paul innocent of any crime.
    - This statement by Lysias is strangely similar to the statement by Pontius Pilate concerning Jesus in Luke 23:14-15, "I have found no guilt in this man."
    - Yet, the truth is that Jesus [and Paul because of Christ] **was not merely innocent, but justified!**
  - In **Verse 31** Luke writes that the soldiers followed their orders and "brought him [Paul] by night to Antipatris."
    - Antipatris was a town some thirty-seven (37) miles to the northwest of Jerusalem in the region of Samaria.
    - It was a military station fortified by Herod the Great and named after his father Antipater.
  - The next day, in **Verse 32**, the soldiers, along with the Apostle Paul, continued on to Caesarea.
    - Upon their arrival, the soldiers [**Verse 33**] delivered the letter [from Lysias] and Paul to the governor.
    - After reading the letter, Felix [**Verse 34**] asked what province Paul was from.
    - Once Felix learns that Paul is from Cilicia, he says, in **Verse 35**, "I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also..."
    - Then, Felix gave orders [**Verse 35**] to keep Paul in Herod's Praetorium.
      - The praetorium was a former palace of Herod the Great and at this point [mid-50s] it served as the Roman headquarters.
      - This would provide Paul with more privileges and comforts than a convicted criminal. He would be held here until his formal hearing before Felix.
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- In this passage, we observe two different reactions to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.
    - The Jews, for the most part, react to Jesus Christ with outright hostility, anger and hatred. Even today, there are many who react to the Gospel in this manner. However, most, at least in America, do not.



- Yet, the Romans act in a way towards Jesus that is rather indifferent. They view Him as someone who may be innocent of the accusations against Him; yet, they certainly do not embrace Him as the Son of God.

Darrell Bock writes, "...the Romans are strictly functional in their reaction [to Jesus Christ]. They are more interested in living through and carrying out the duties of their everyday lives than seriously engaging what Paul is setting forth. Many people go through life just pursuing their own goals or seeking to survive rather than engaging in a serious way with what God has for them. Whether this is the result of their own background and training about life or is motivated by the self-focus our culture tends to generate, it is a major distraction from the reason we were created by God. The Creator deserves more than a patronizing recognition in our lives."

- Secondly, however, is that, in this passage, we observe that no matter what the enemies of God try to do, to matter how well-planned are their schemes, God's providence will **always** prevail.
  - The LORD often uses the plans of the wicked, as he does here, as the *means* of accomplishing his foreordained will.
  - Here, the Lord had already ordained that Paul would preach the Gospel in Rome [as Christ reveals in Acts 23:11]; however, it was through the plotting of the forty [40] conspirators that Lysias was "forced" to send Paul out of Jerusalem to Caesarea. This was, once again, an example of the spreading of the Gospel to the Gentiles through the rejection of it by the Jews. In fact, in less the twenty years Jerusalem would fall to the Romans [and along with it the Temple].
  - Another example of God's providential control over His enemies' plans was in the case of Judas. Judas was the means by which Christ was arrested and put on trial. His Jewish and Roman trials eventually led to his crucifixion. Finally, it was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ [as well as His subsequent burial, resurrection and ascension] which was required by God in order to save us, His people.
  - Thus, we realize, through this passage, that although enemies surround us, God will **always** accomplish His will for us in our lives!

### **Psalm 34:3-8**

O magnify the LORD with me,  
 And let us exalt His name together.  
 I sought the LORD, and He answered me,  
 And delivered me from all my fears.  
 They looked to Him and were radiant,  
 And their faces will never be ashamed.  
 This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him  
 And saved him out of all his troubles.  
 The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him,  
 And rescues them.

O taste and see that the LORD is good;  
How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!