**The Plot To Kill Paul**

(Acts 23:12-35)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

A man who worked at an Aldi’s grocery store had the meanest, nastiest boss anyone could ever imagine, and one day he’d had enough of him. So he called Arty, the local hitman, and asked him what it would cost to dispose of his horrible boss. Arty answered, “My fee is $10,000, up front.” The man said, “Doggone it! I don’t have that kind of money, and I really hate Mr. Renquist.” Arty said, “*Ronald* Renquist? I hate him too! He’s a miserable jerk. Tell you what, I’ll off him *for a dollar.”* So Arty snuck into the boss’s office and *strangled* that fiendish ogre of a man. But as he left, his mean and nasty assistant manager saw his face, so Arty strangled him too. The next day, the headlines read, “Arty chokes 2 for a dollar at Aldi’s.”

Speaking of planning to do someone in, here in our text some unsaved Jews who *really* hated the Apostle Paul are about to get together and devise a plan to kill him. The story begins in verse 12, where we read,

**“And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul” (Acts 23:12).**

Now to begin with, if that sounds like an odd way to go about killing someone, history says that taking oaths like that was pretty common among the Jews in those days. The Jewish historian Josephus says that ten Jews once vowed an oath like that to kill Herod the Great.

Of course, you’d have to be crazy and a half to think you could kill someone as closely guarded as the Emperor of Rome! But these guys had to be *equally* crazy, because—as we saw in our last lesson—*Paul* was being closely guarded by a Roman army *in a Roman castle.* But as we read on, we see that this band of killers involved more than just 2 or 3 guys with a chip on their shoulder. Luke goes on to tell us that,

**“And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy” (Acts 23:13).**

Now here I need to point out that there’s a reason the Bible doesn’t tell us *exactly* how many conspirators there were. I mean, we often read about *42* things in the Bible, or *45* things. But here, God wants to call attention to the number *40.* You see, numbers in Scripture are oftentimes spiritually significant.

For instance, the number 8 is the number of *new beginnings.* There’s 7 days in a week, and the *8th* day begins a *new* week. 8 people stepped off Noah’s ark to a new beginning. And there were 8 people raised from the dead in the Bible, and each one of *them* was given a new beginning.

And the number *40* is the number of *judgment* and *testing.* When God judged the world in Noah’s day, the Bible says,

**“...the rain was upon the earth *forty days and forty nights”* (Genesis 7:12).**

The number 40 there is associated with the judgment of a world-wide flood. But later on in Scripture, we see 40 associated with *testing,* when

**“the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Send thou men, *that they may search the land of Canaan,* which I give unto the children of Israel...And they returned from searching of the land after *forty days*...and they...came to Moses...and...told him...*we be not able to go up against the people;* for they are stronger than we...all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature...*giants”* (Numbers 13:1,2,25,26,27,31-33).**

Now the reason that was a *test* is that God had told them He’d give them the power to *conquer* those giants. When the Jews believed *the spies* instead of believing Him, *they failed the test.* And God decided to judge them—*in a 40-ish way.* He told them,

**“After the number of the days in which ye searched the land, *even forty days,* each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, *even forty years...”* (Numbers 14:34).**

That’s why it took Israel 40 years to make the *11 day journey* to the Promised Land. Well, that plus the fact that Moses was a man, so he refused to stop and ask for directions!

But that *judgment* was also a *test,* as we see when Moses told the Jews,

**“the LORD thy God led thee these *forty years* in the wilderness...*to prove thee,* to know what was in thine heart, *whether thou wouldest keep His commandments,* or no” (Deuteronomy 8:2).”**

So Israel’s 40 years of wilderness wandering was a judgment *and* a test.

We see the number 40 associated with judgment again in Jonah 3:4, where

**“Jonah...cried...*Yet* *forty* *days,* and Nineveh shall be *overthrown.”***

And we see 40 associated with *testing* again in Mark 1:13 where, speaking of the Lord Jesus, it says:

**“...He was there in the wilderness *forty* *days,* tempted of Satan.”**

Satan *tested* the Lord for 40 days *to see if He’d sin.* Aren’t you glad He didn’t, so He could die for *your* sins, instead of having sins of his How to die for (Rom.6:23)?

But now, if you’re wondering why the number 40 is the number of *both* judgment and testing, it’s because God always judged *Israel* to test to see how they would *respond* to being judged, as we just saw when God judged Israel 40 years in the wilderness to test to see if they’d keep His commandments.

And that’s why, instead of telling us that there were *43* cutthroats trying to kill Paul, or *44,* the Bible emphasizes that word *forty,* because here in the Book of Acts, Israel is *again* being judged and tested.

It all started back in the 40th book of the Bible, the Book of Matthew, where the Lord Jesus Christ showed up and preached to the Jews—for a little more than 40 months—to test to see if they’d receive Him. Instead, they crucified Him and stoned His prophet Stephen. So God judged them *by putting them aside,* to test to see if they’d receive the new message of *grace* being preached by Paul. At least that’s what it says in Romans 10:21, where

***“...to Israel He saith,* All day long I have stretched forth My hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.”**

God judged the nation of Israel for getting the Romans to nail *His Son’s* hands to a cross. But even after God judged *the nation,* God Himself was still stretching forth *His* hands to *individuals* in Israel, *begging* them to listen to Paul’s new message of grace.

But now, did you know that there was a time when Moses judged *himself* to try to bear God’s judgment on Israel *on himself?* He told his nation,

**“...in Horeb ye provoked the LORD to wrath, *so that the LORD was angry with you to have destroyed you*...then I abode in the mount forty days and forty nights, *I neither did eat bread nor drink water...*because of all your sins...*Thus* I fell down before the LORD *forty days and forty nights*...because the LORD had said He would destroy you” (Deuteronomy 9:8,9,18,25).**

Moses tried to bear Israel’s judgment by neither eating or drinking for 40 days. And just in case God wasn’t satisfied with his fast, look what *else* he offered God to sweeten the deal:

**“Moses returned unto the LORD, and said, *Oh,* *this people have sinned a great sin,* and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin--; and if not, *blot me,* I pray Thee, *out of Thy book which Thou hast written”* (Exodus 32:31,32).**

And he was talking about *The Book of Life,* the book of *eternal* life, the book that contains the names of the saved of all the ages. In other words, Moses was offering God *his very soul.*

And that made him a type of Christ, who *did* bear the judgment of Israel’s sins on His soul, as Isaiah predicted He would when he wrote,

**“...it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief: *when Thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin”* (Isaiah 53:10).**

And you know what? The prophet Ezekiel was *another* type of Christ in that respect. God told *him,*

***“This shall be a sign to the house of Israel.* Lie thou...on thy right side, and thou shalt *bear the iniquity* of the house of Judah *forty days:* I have appointed thee each day for a year” (Ezekiel 4:3-6).**

Now here I have to pause to point out that God was *always* having His prophets to do things like that *to act out* their messages; like the time He told Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot for three years. You know, any time I think I got it rough *as a pastor,* I think of how rough the *prophets* had it—especially Isaiah and his bare *feet.*

Now the *reason* God had His prophets do all those odd things was to get people to ask them what they were doing, so they’d get the chance to explain the message they were acting out. “Hey, Isaiah. I couldn’t help notice that you’re naked, so—what’s up with that?”

And Ezekiel woke up every morning, kissed his wife goodbye and said, “Time to go to work!” And then went out and laid on his right side in some public area all day *for 40 days.* And when they asked him, “What’s up with *that?”* he explained how he was bearing the judgment of their sins in a symbolic way.

And both Moses and Ezekiel were types of what Paul told the Galatians, saying,

**“Christ hath redeemed us from *the curse* of the law, *being made a curse for us”* (Galatians 3:13).**

And as Paul went around *telling* Jews that Christ was cursed to redeem them from the *great* curse of sin, these 40 Jews put *themselves* under a “great” curse to symbolize their *rejection* of his message.

And that’s ironic, because—do you know who *else* was willing to bear the curse of Israel’s sins? Paul told the Romans,

**“I could wish that *myself* were accursedfrom Christ *for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh”* (Romans 9:3).**

Now here I hasten to add that it wasn’t *possible* for Paul to be accursed from Christ, *because he was saved.* But he wished he could be. And these 40 men wished *they* were cursed if they couldn’t kill him, to show their rejection of his message of grace.

So once again, we’re seeing the Book of Acts *acting out* what God was doing at that time—judging and testing Israel—just like *the prophets* used to act out their messages. God’s Word was now doing what the prophets used to do.

But now, there might have been 40 of these bad guys, but they were still going to have to come up with a pretty good plan to kill a man being guarded by a Roman army in a Roman castle—and they did, as we see in the next two verses of our text:

**“And they came to the chief priests and elders, and said, We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul.**

**“Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain that he bring him down unto you to morrow, as though ye would enquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him” (Acts 23:14,15).**

Those 40 killers asked the Jewish council to ask the chief captain to bring Paul *out* of the castle, ostensibly so the council could get a more perfect understanding of the answersPaul had given them the day before, when he appeared before the council. And what we’re seeing symbolized *here* is the decline of the nation Israel.

You see, they had their chance to get Paul condemned and executed in an orderly fashion when he appeared before their council in the first 11 verses of this chapter, as we saw in our last lesson. But Paul got himself *acquitted* at that trial, just by saying that all he was guilty of was preaching the doctrine of the resurrection. But now that they’ve failed to have Paul executed in an orderly fashion, they *conspire* with some *assassins* to kill him.

And that’s symbolic of the spiritual decline we see of the nation Israel *throughout* the Book of Acts. One of the purposes of Acts is to show the decline of Israel, and the rise of the Body of Christ. And we’re seeing that *decline* being acted out very clearly here, as the nation find itself guilty of conspiracy to commit murder.

But thankfully, when the 40 cutthroats outlined their plan to the Jewish council, someone overheard it, as we see in verse 16 of this chapter:

**“And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul” (Acts 23:16).**

Paul’s nephew overheard the plot, and ratted them out to Paul!

But now, let’s think this through. The only way Paul’s sister’s son could have overheard that murderous plot was if he was hanging around the council when those 40 killers explained it to them. That tells us that they boy’s *father,* Paul’s sister’s *husband,* must have been *on* the Jewish council, or else why would the boy be allowed to be hanging around it?

And since Paul’s sister’s husband didn’t go *warn* Paul when he heard about the plot, that shows he wasn’t saved. But when his son *did* warn Paul, that shows he *was* saved. I mean, you could argue that he was just a good boy who didn’t want to see a man get murdered. But a good boy wouldn’t do something he knew his father wouldn’t approve of, and he knew his father wouldn’t approve of warning Paul, or he’d have done it himself!

So we know he *wasn’t* just a good boy trying to prevent a man from being murdered. He was a *saved* boy trying to keep *an apostle* from being murdered. That means here we see God using His *people* to help Paul, instead of using a *miracle* to help him, like He did earlier in Acts when He used a miraculous *earthquake* to break Paul out of jail. That’s because the Book of Acts records the transition from God’s kingdom program, when He helped His people *supernaturally,* to His grace program, where He helps *us* by using other members of the Body of Christ.

Now if you don’t think that’s as *flashy* as helping us using *miracles,* I remind you that to help us using a *miracle,* God would only have to overpower the laws of *nature.* To help us using *people,* He has to overpower *human* nature, because people are usually too selfish to help one another.

That always reminds me of how Christians usually think that the biggest miracle God is going to work in the kingdom of heaven on earth is when He overcomes the nature of *animals* to get wolves and lions not to eat the lambs. But the biggest miracle in the kingdom is going to be when God overcomes *human* nature to get men to live for one another like they did at Pentecost, when God was giving them a *taste* of the kingdom. Now *that* was a miracle! And it’s a miracle today when God gets selfish people like you and me to live for one another.

Now by the way, this part of the story tells us that Paul was able to receive visitors in that prison! I point that out because in our last lesson we were wondering why the 12 apostles didn’t go visit Paul in that Jerusalem prison, even though they *lived* in Jerusalem! The reason was, if they associated themselves with this guy who unsaved Jews were trying to kill, those unsaved Jews were going to come after *them.*

Did you ever wonder why unsaved Jews weren’t trying to kill the 12 apostles, even though they were preaching Christ just like Paul was? It’s because just preaching Christ *no longer angered them.* By this time in the Book of Acts, they figured Jews who believed in Jesus were just another sect of Judaism, like the ones we read about in Acts 5:17,

**“...the sect of the Sadducees”**

And the sect we read about in Acts 15:5,

**“...the sect of the Pharisees”**

And in Acts 24:5, they called Jews who believed in Jesus,

**“....the sect *of the Nazarenes”***

So preaching Christ no longer angered unsaved Jews. Take the time to re-read Acts 21, and you’ll recall that James and thousands of *other* Jews who believed in Jesus were living in Jerusalem with no persecution at all from unsaved Jews. That’s because they believed in Jesus, but they were all “zealous of the law.” But *Paul* was preaching *grace,* and *not* the law, and *that’s* what made those unsaved Jews furious enough to want to *murder* him. And that’s because the devil always makes sure men persecute what God wants preached *now,* and what God wants preached now, in the dispensation of grace, *is grace!*

Now the 12 *should* have stood with Paul in his hour of need. But when they *didn’t,* that’s an example of the spiritual decline *of the Jewish kingdom church* that we’re *also* seeing in our study of Acts, in addition to the decline of the nation of Israel as a whole.

First, we saw they fired Peter as the head of the 12 apostles, and picked James to replace him, just because he was the Lord’s brother. Imagine getting fired at Peter’s age! I jest, because I myself just got fired by Berean Bible Society. But it was my own fault, so I’m just having fun with it!

But after firing Peter, God’s *old* main apostle, the Jewish kingdom church was now failing to support Paul, God’s *new* main apostle. So the Book of Acts records the decline of the Jewish kingdom church as well.

Well, when Paul heard about this plot, he knew just what to do:

**“Then Paul called one of the centurions unto him, and said, Bring this young man unto the chief captain: for he hath a certain thing to tell him” (Acts 23:17).**

Now here, let me remind you of something we learn about centurions in Matthew 8:8,9, where

**“The centurion...said...I am a man...having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, *and he goeth;* and to another, Come, *and he cometh;* and to my servant, Do this, *and he doeth it.”***

As you can see, centurions were used to *giving* men orders, not *taking* them! And this one *certainly* wasn’t used to being ordered around *by his prisoners.* But *Paul* told this centurion to come—*and he came!* And he told him to do something, and as we’ll see in a minute—*he did it!* Now why do you suppose that was?

It was because the respectful way Paul *treated* the centurion had earned him the same kind of respectful treatment in return! I said it before, and I’ll say it again, because it bears repeating. You can be a jerk if you’re wrongfully arrested on some false charges if you want to, but if you’re respectful instead—*it just might save your life!* It saved *Paul’s* life here, as we see in the next verse of our text,

**“So he took him, and brought him to the chief captain, and said, Paul the prisoner called me unto him, and prayed me to bring this young man unto thee, who hath something to say unto thee” (Acts 23:18).**

Now here I should point out that when he told his captain that the boy had “something” to tell him, that means *he didn’t know what it was.* And *that* means he had such respect for Paul, he hadn’t even questioned the boy to see if what he had to say was important enough to bother his superior officer with it! He just tells the chief captain the boy has something to say, and

**“Then the chief captain took him by the hand, and went with him aside privately, and asked him, What is that thou hast to tell me?” (Acts 23:19).**

Now here we see that this *boy* was no *teenager,* or else the chief captain would not have taken him “by the hand” like that. If you try to hold hands with a teen-aged boy, he’s going to look at you in your Roman soldier skirt and wonder what you’re up to! Even a *pre-teen* is going to look at you sideways in such a case. Taking a boy by the hand is how you lead *a very young* boy aside to talk to him. This was *a little kid* who knocked on the massive doors of a Roman castle and asked to speak to one of the prisoners! And now he’s standing there in front of a big, scary soldier,

**“And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul to morrow into the council, as though they would enquire somewhat of him more perfectly.**

**“But do not thou yield unto them: for there lie in wait for him of them more than forty men, which have bound themselves with an oath, that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him: and now are they ready, looking for a promise from thee.**

**“So the chief captain then let the young man depart, and charged him, See thou tell no man that thou hast shewed these things to me” (Acts 23:20-22).**

Now you gotta love this kid! He’s looking up at this soldier, who probably *towered* above him, and says, “Do not thou yield unto those killers!” And the captain listens to him!

And we know why.

It’s because if he didn’t, something he did back in the last chapter was going to come back to bite him—something we read about in Acts 22:29, where

**“...the chief captain...was afraid, after he knew that he was a Roman...*because he had bound him.”***

The chief captain had broken the law by binding Paul before he had his day in court! So now Paul has him steppin’ ‘n fetchin’ to try to please him. All because Paul very graciously didn’t turn him in to his superiors for binding him.

This story reminds me of a school I was painting one summer back when I was a painting contractor. I was running out of time to finish the job on time, because they only let me work from 9 to 4. So I asked the superintendent if he could have the custodian begin letting me in at 5 the next morning, and he instructed him to do it.

But the next day, the guy didn’t show up until 9! Meanwhile, I’m standing there waiting for him in the dark for four hours, by myself, in an iffy neighborhood. And I could have ratted him out to the superintendent and got him in all kinds of trouble.

But I didn’t. And let me tell you, for the last several days of that job, he not only showed up at 5 every day, I had that man eating out of my hand. I mean, it was “Yes sir,” and “No, sir,” and “Anything you say, sir.” And on the last day of the job, he said to me, “Do you think your son would like this toy race car the kindergarten is throwing away? And do you think your daughter might like this microscope the lab is throwing away?” At least I *hope* the lab was throwing it away!

But it was all because I showed the man *a little grace.* And when Paul showed *the chief captain* a little grace by not telling his superiors he’d illegally bound him, it saved Paul’s life—and in a major way, as we see as we read on:

**“And he called unto him two centurions, saying, Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred, at the third hour of the night;**

**“And provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor” (Acts 23:23,24).**

Now if you want to talk about stepn’ ‘n fetchin’! This guy musters and deploys *200 soldiers,* along with 70 cavalrymen, and 200 infantrymen, for a total of *470 men.* Oh, and more than one beast to set Paul on, in case the first beast they set him on got tired. Or maybe so Paul could bring Luke along to record all this for us, although that’s not how I read it.

And once again we see *the government* saving Paul, like the govern-*or* did in Acts 18, and the government’s *town clerk* did in Acts 19, and the government’s *soldiers* did in Acts 22. All to teach us how God saves *us* from bad guys and persecutors by using the government, as we talked about in a previous lesson.

But the chief captain knew he had to send a letter explaining to the governor why this prisoner was arriving with 470 guards, and we see him begin to do that in verses 25,26:

**“And he wrote a letter after this manner:**

**“Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sendeth greeting” (Acts 23:25,26).**

Now the name “Claudius” means *lame,* and “Lysias” means *releaser.* And let me tell you, this guy was a lame releaser *of the Apostle Paul.* Once he realized he was in over his head with Paul in this situation with a city filled with furious unsaved Jews who want him dead, he passed the buck and shuffled him off to the governor. And along with him, he sends this letter, with a pretty lame version of the story:

**“This man was taken of the Jews, and should have been killed of them: then came I with an army, and rescued him, having understood that he was a Roman” (Acts 23:27).**

Now if you remember the story, you know that what Claudius told the governor was *not* the story! He hadn’t rescued Paul because he knew he was a Roman citizen. He found that out later after he illegally bound him. This is just another example of an unbeliever trying to make himself look good to his boss. That kind of thing goes on all the time among government employees, just like it does among employees in *any* workplace. And that’s not going to change until Christ comes at the end of the Tribulation to *fix* the world’s governments in the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Well, after Claud told Felix that he rescued Paul, we’re told,

**“And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council:**

**“Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds” (Acts 23:28,29).**

Now as you may remember, the Jews had falsely accused Paul of breaking the law of Moses. And once the chief captain knew that the apostle wasn’t being charged with breaking any *Roman* laws that would have rendered him worthy of death or bonds, he kept Paul safe from the Jews. The Romans didn’t care what your religion was. They let *all* religions practice their faith, and didn’t let any of them persecute any other, as we saw back in Acts 18:

**“...when Gallio was the deputy of Achaia, the Jews made insurrection with one accord against Paul, *and brought him to the judgment seat,* saying, This fellow persuadeth men to worship God *contrary to the law.* And when Paul was now about to open his mouth, Gallio said unto the Jews, If it were a matter of wrong or wicked lewdness, O ye Jews, reason would that I should bear with you: But if it be a question of...*your* law, look *ye* to it; for I will be no judge of such matters. *And he drave them from the judgment seat”* (Acts 18:12-16).**

Paul didn’t have to say a *thing* when he was taken to court for his faith. And our government affords us the same protection from persecution from other religions.

Now that’s not a *guarantee* in the dispensation of grace. During the Spanish Inquisition, some governments persecuted Protestants for not practicing Catholicism. But that doesn’t change the fact that God ordained governments to protect His people, just like He ordained husbands to protect their wives and children. It’s only when men don’t do what God ordained them to do that God’s people have to suffer the consequences.

Well, after the captain told the governor how he rescued Paul in this letter, he told him,

**“And when it was told me how that the Jews laid wait for the man, I sent straightway to thee, and gave commandment to his accusers also to say before thee what they had against him. Farewell” (Acts 23:30).**

Now here we learn that after Claudius sent Paul to the governor, he commanded the Jews who were accusing him, saying, as it were, “If you guys have a beef with Paul, you can travel the *80 miles* to Caesarea and tell the governor about it! That’s your reward for trying to kill him!”

I can’t prove it, but I suspect that that was probably standard operating procedure for chief captains, so they could see how seriousplaintiffs were about pursuing their grievances. Do you know what happens if a man sues you, and then doesn’t show up in court? The judge dismisses the case out of hand! But in our next lesson, we’re going to see that the Jews *did* travel the 80 miles to testify against Paul, because they *were* serious about their grievance! The devil’s people always are!

Well, that’s what the letter said. All that’s left now was to send the soldiers to Caesarea with it:

**“Then the soldiers, as it was commanded them, took Paul, and brought him by night to Antipatris.**

**“On the morrow they left the horsemen to go with him, and returned to the castle” (Acts 23:31,32).**

Now here I should take the time to explain that they only needed that army of 400 to protect Paul while passing through the area surrounding Jerusalem that was heavily populated by Jews. Once they traveled the 50 miles to Antipatris, however, the army returned home, and they let the 70 horsemen deliver Paul to Felix with horsemen-like haste.

And speaking of those horsemen, our passage finishes by saying of them,

**“Who, when they came to Caesarea and delivered the epistle to the governor, presented Paul also before him.**

**“And when the governor had read the letter, he asked of what province he was. And when he understood that he was of Cilicia;**

**“I will hear thee, said he, when thine accusers are also come. And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's judgment hall” (Acts 23:33-35).**

In closing, aren’t you glad it’s not possible for *you* to be cursed from Christ, because you’re saved as well? And aren’t you glad that the God who *safeguards* your salvation is the One who could write an amazing Book such as we’ve studied in this lesson?